Big Daddy? Big Sister? Every BioShock 2 question answered!

PC GAMER

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Better than the original?

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PC gaming's worst crimes crushed by our gavel of justice.

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See p.39

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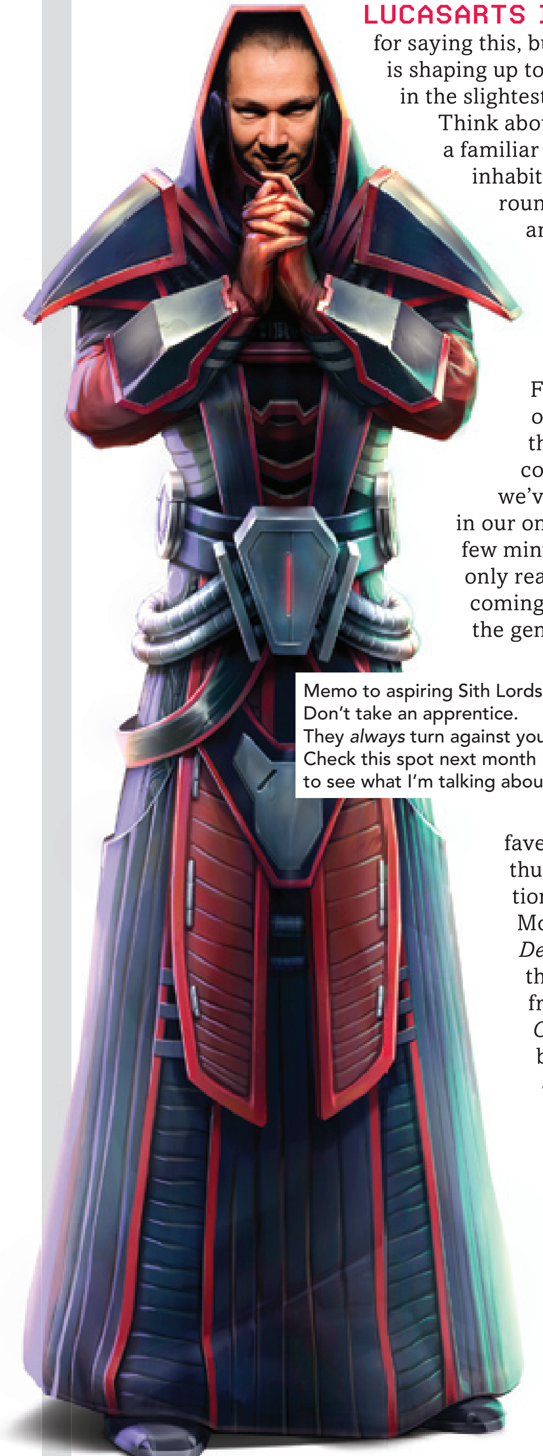
PLEASE NOTE

Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.

AN OLD HOPE



LUCASARTS IS GONNA THROTTLE me for saying this, but the real reason *The Old Republic* is shaping up to be so awesome? Because it's not in the slightest bit innovative.

Think about it for a second. They've taken a familiar world—one we're all thrilled to inhabit, mind you—and they've surrounded it with the familiar gameplay and storytelling techniques that developer BioWare has honed in their offline offerings. This isn't a revolution in MMO gameplay, dear readers. This is a revolution in *sensibility*. Finally, a massively multiplayer online RPG that's set to deliver the comfortable yet undeniably compelling offline experience that we've all come to cherish—and covet in our online gaming. Play *TOR* for just a few minutes, and you'll realize that the only real threat to *World of Warcraft* isn't coming from a game that's redefining the genre, but instead from a game that unabashedly eschews innovation for the sake of polish, familiarity, refinement and classic storytelling.

Our coverstar isn't the only game that's gone in this direction. My personal faves in this issue are also gleefully thumbing their noses at innovation for the sake of fun. *BioShock 2*? More of the same, but better. *Left 4 Dead 2*? Everything we loved about the first game, with sunshine and frying pans. *Tiger Woods PGA Tour Online*? Same old *Tiger*, but in a browser. *Machinarium*? Retro 2D adventure. *Torchlight*? *Diablo* 2.5—perfect.

So let this be a call to action for developers everywhere: Innovation is overrated. Who needs "new" when you can have awesome instead?

Memo to aspiring Sith Lords: Don't take an apprentice. They *always* turn against you. Check this spot next month to see what I'm talking about.

GARY

GARY STEINMAN,
EDITOR IN CHIEF

THE PLAYLIST 0110

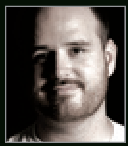
GARY STEINMAN EDITOR IN CHIEF

Click click *Torchlight*!

LOGAN DECKER EXECUTIVE EDITOR

After enduring the humiliation of watching the lone office copy tossed back and forth over his head to everybody else, *Dragon Age: Origins* has finally come to Steam. Logan's ready.

DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR

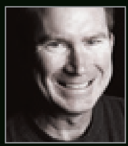


Dan is in a full freefall down into the depths of *Torchlight*'s bottomless dungeons. If he's not back in three days, send a search party after him—tell them to bring clean underpants.

EVAN LAHTI ASSOCIATE EDITOR

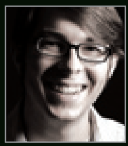
8,254. That's the number of zombie hides Evan's purged from the world in his two weeks with *Left 4 Dead 2* (you're welcome). His favorite weapon combo: auto-sniper and fire axe.

DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER



Who says camping is a bad thing? Not Dan! He's been lurking in the shrubbery, staking out the perfect spots, biding his time...grilling chicken and drinking beers. Yes, *that* camping.

JOSH AUGUSTINE CONTRIBUTING EDITOR



Pumping stubby zombies full of lead as a rifle-wielding Vanquisher in *Torchlight* and frying Darkspawn with fireballs as a Mage in *Dragon Age: Origins* has been very, very satisfying. Josh happy.

ERIK BELSAAS THING 1

When not benchmarking an endless wave of new ATI video cards, Erik has been loving up *Dragon Age: Origins* for hours upon hours. The difficulty is crazy, but so is the addiction...

PRENTICE GEDE THING 2

Oh Garrett and unnamed hacker dude, shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Alas, Looking Glass Studios, thou wert too young too depart this mortal coil.

Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

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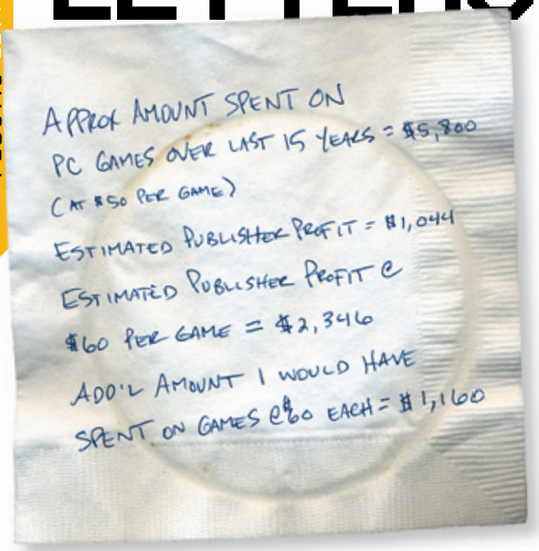
LETTERS



LETTERS

In order to promote stronger bonds between ourselves and our readers, PC Gamer has invented email. You just type in what you want to say, and type the subject of your email in the subject box, and then type "letters@pcgamer.com" in the address box, and click "Send." Awesome!

WIN!

LEFT 4 DEAD 2

Four civilians vs. endless throngs of the undead. Odds: Poor. Winning a free Steam code for *Left 4 Dead 2*. Odds: Significantly better. Just email contests@pcgamer.com with "iwillnotgogentlyintothatgoodnight" in the subject line to enter in our drawing to win a free copy of—you guessed it—*Left 4 Dead 2*. Contest ends February 12, 2010. Read the full contest rules on page 95.

PRICE ADVICE

When I saw the bright red price tag in the headline to "The Price Is Wrong" (December 2009) I thought, "Yeah, why the hell is the price of PC games going up?" I assumed that Dan was going to give his view on why the prices of PC games are absurd and how we can combat increases. And for the first time that I can remember, I was happy that I was wrong! The way Dan chose to show how much games of the past would have cost in 2009 dollars was absolutely brilliant, and it really made me rethink the value of PC games.

I did some quick math about my own investment in PC gaming, and I thought it would be fun to share the numbers with you (see napkin above).

Now if I divide $1,160 (the additional amount I would have spent on games at the higher $60 price) by 5475—the number of days in fifteen years, the result is 0.21187, or 21 cents a day. Personally, I'd be more than happy to spend an extra 21 cents a day if it meant that PC games would become the number one choice for gamers, developers and publishers alike! PETER RYAN

As with most armchair economists, "The Price Is Wrong" author only looks at the short-term benefit and not the long-term effects of a price increase in PC games. Inevitably, when the price of any product rises, supply increases (as the article suggests, game makers would be enticed into the market by higher profits) and demand decreases (as the number of games consumers can afford to buy is reduced). $10 doesn't sound like a lot of money, but it represents a 20 percent increase over current pricing. Increased competition for fewer gaming dollars will lead to falling prices and we'll likely end right back at the current $50 price with a few more bankrupt game makers pushed out of the market.

I bet that most developers would sigh and respond "If we could, we would."

JOHNNY KELOWNA

About. Damn. Time. Why do PC gamers whine about the price of games? I'm having a hard time making ends meet just like most other working-class people out there, but $60 for a great PC game is perfectly fine by me.

If we are going to show developers that gamers are serious about wanting top-shelf games to be developed for the PC along with the consoles, then we need to stop sniveling over paying ten bucks more and pony up. Support our game developers—their passion is making games. Our passion is playing them. Booyah! BEN PEARMAN

DOSBox (right) isn't just a DOS emulator—it can also throttle down your CPU speed to play classic games like *X-COM: UFO Defense* (above).

DON'T FORGET DOSBOX

You recommended winThrottle or CPUKiller3 to slow down the speed of *X-COM UFO Defense* (Letters, November 2009), but wouldn't DOSBox be the better choice? It offers so many options, as well as Sound Blaster (original through 16) emulation and IPX network support (that tunnels through your current home/work LAN or over the 'net)—essential for those games that don't support TCP/IP protocols for multiplayer (including *Descent*). PSIKO

Good point, Psiko! Although we do prefer the simplicity of a processor throttling utility if that's all you need, DOSBox (free, www.dosbox.com), despite being difficult to troubleshoot, does offer many more options.

THANK 'EVANS

I can't tell you how long I've been waiting for a feature in *PC Gamer* like Evan Lahti's "From the Front." Most people see gamers as male, teenage and immature people cursing up a storm over global chat or in-game VOIP. It's communities like Tactical Gamer (just one name among many) that make PC gaming not only highly organized, but also intensely tactical and fun. As a fellow TG member and TGU instructor, I can't tell you what a smile this issue brought to my face. I hope you guys run more articles like this in the future!

RACHEL "DRBEAT" SZE

SIERRA SOUNDTRACKS ON TAP

Although it's true that the soundtrack for Sierra's *King's Quest* games was never released (Gamestock 2009, December 2009), you can legally download MIDI files and MP3s from almost all the Sierra classics, including the *King's Quest* series, at www.queststudios.com.

KRISTIAN KARLSHØJ

Nice work—what a find! Not only are the soundtracks at Quest Studios free and completely legal to download, but Sierra Online actually helped Tom Lewandowski establish the site by providing him with music from its archive.

PC GAMER AFTER HOURS

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MULTIPLAYER

PC Gamer Steam Group **http://steamcommunity.com/groups/pcg**

PC Gamer/ Maximum PC Team Fortress 2 Server IP **66.151.138.34:27015**

"As a Tactical Gamer member, I can't tell you what a smile this issue brought to my face." RACHEL "DRBEAT" SZE

No NPCs here: a platoon or so of Tactical Gamer members salute.

SAD PANDA'S CORRECTION BOOTH

- There's no point in arguing with reader Eric Allen about the "Never released" *Homeworld* soundtrack. Allen tells us that the soundtrack was in fact included as a second disc in the original Game of the Year Edition and that he knows because "I'm listening to it right now."
- A reader who signed his email with something unprintable let us know that Microsoft is no longer selling the "Family Pack" of Windows 7 pre-order upgrades. Microsoft's website blandly states that "The reduced-price offer has ended" but adds that it's "looking forward to sharing the Windows 7 journey with you." At the full price.
- Sean Flavin reminds us that Assassins in *Aion* can use swords. It's two-handed greatswords that they can't use, presumably to prevent them from bulking up too much.

PRTSCN "WTF!"

Reader Jace Capalbo sent us this image from *Left 4 Dead* with a simple and evocative caption: WTF! Well, we think we know wtf. Obviously this Hunter, whether pre- or post-infection, was a fan of Belgian martial arts superstar Jean-Claude Van Damme, and is duplicating Van Damme's legendary kitchen-splits maneuver that broke the record in 1994 for the most number of times an action hero avoided electrocution by doing the splits on the kitchen counter (see inset).

Send your favorite images and screenshots to the PC Gamer Historical Archives. If we print them, you will stand shoulder-to-shoulder-mounted-rocket-launcher with the gods and goddesses of PC gaming history!

10 YEARS AGO

ISSUE 73 JANUARY 2000

COVER STORY: Ultimate Strategy Guide 2000: Expert advice with no Y2K hysteria.

TOP SELLING GAMES: *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings* (94%), *Deer Hunter III* (N/A), *Cabela's Big Game Hunter 3* (N/A), *Microsoft Flight Simulator 98* (85%)

IN THE NEWS: David Bowie talks up his participation in *Omikron* ("If there are any more roles as omnipresent digital beings out there, then I'm your man!"); Warren Spector laments the rising cost of game production ("bigger teams, higher production values...that adds up to big barriers to entry, increased publisher and retail control, and decreased likelihood of developers taking chances"); Li Kuo joins the rogues gallery at *PC Gamer*.

PREVIEWED: *Thief 2: The Metal Age, Allegiance, Majesty, Ground Control*

NOTABLE REVIEWS: *Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings* (94%) "Fulfills the 'sequel wish list' for fans of the first game and goes even further…I cannot find any significant flaws in this game"; *FreeSpace 2* (93%) "The *Descent* connection has been severed, and this remarkable series is [now] free to carve its own path"; *Nocturne* (56%) "A sloppy mishmash of pixels…turned out to be a werewolf's ass"; *Grand Theft Auto 2* (62%) "I just don't see the need for this game."

BIG LOSER: *Spec Ops II: Green Berets* (26%) "My number two man absolutely loves to shoot me in the head."

HARDWARE: Hardware Transform and Lighting in GeForce 256 cards is explained; Logitech debuts the Wingman Force Feedback Mouse (and buries it not long after).

Sea change

Big Daddy? Big Sister? We burst the bubble on the biggest questions about BioShock 2

VITALS
DEVELOPER 2K Marin, 2K Australia, Digital Extremes, 2K China
PUBLISHER 2K
RELEASE February 2010
LINK www.bioshockgame.com

Would you kindly be more excited about *BioShock 2*? No?

Well, you're not alone. Not even the powerful mind-control imbued in that politely trite phrase—three simple words that pushed *BioShock*'s Jack Ryan to unwittingly perform so many insidious acts on command—could get us to muster up more anticipation for this major sequel. Once we got past the thrill surrounding the initial reveal of playing as the Big Daddy and fighting Big Sisters, we sorta lost interest. Like a lot of fellow gamers, we figured *BioShock 2* would be good, we worried a bit about the various problems that it might face, then we moved on. ¶ Until we played it. After revisiting Rapture and battling our way through the game's first level—followed by a candid chat with the development team—we're suddenly as giddy as a Little Sister downwind from a freshly decomposing corpse. Oh, we've still got concerns. Big concerns. But *BioShock 2* is once again electrifying our spirits like a fresh batch of ADAM injected directly into our carotid. So *would you kindly* read on to find our 5 biggest questions about this massive sequel—and our inside take on whether the game will equal, or even surpass, its predecessor. **GARY STEINMAN**

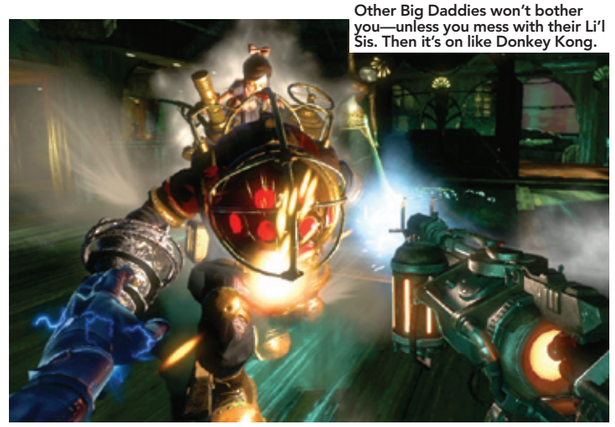
1 Will Big Daddy be a big disappointment?

Fact: Playing as the Big Daddy in the original game was the second biggest disappointment in an otherwise spectacular experience. (For the worst, see #5.) You were overpowered yet hobbled—a lumbering dullard that turned what should've been an awesome moment of wish-fulfillment into a wish-this-was-over chore. The good news? The team is fully aware of this.

"We knew we didn't want to do what we did in the first game," admits Lead Environment Artist J.R. Hogarth de la Plante. "Many players weren't impressed because you were slow, and you couldn't use any of the weapons that the Big Daddy had."

This time around, being a Big Daddy will be nothing like stepping into the clunky shoes of a Rosie or a Bouncer—both plus-size specialists with limited tools at their disposal. In *BioShock 2*, you're a prototype Big Daddy: a fully rational human in a suit that's much closer to human proportions, with a full arsenal of weapons and plasmids to play around with. "He's sort of like a Swiss Army Daddy," jokes Animation Supervisor Jeff Weir.

When we first stepped into the suit, we were immediately



Other Big Daddies won't bother you—unless you mess with their Li'l Sis. Then it's on like Donkey Kong.

struck by how good it felt. This is *BioShock*, but better. The biggest improvement: the streamlined ability to dual-wield, using your Plasmids and weapons without having to switch between them. Other upgrades include the ability to melee with any

weapon (no more wrench!), and an arsenal of alternate ammo that functions as traps, letting you set up a perimeter when you have to protect a Little Sister who's harvesting ADAM. And then there's that drill—a lovely swirling dervish that's just so satisfying when you need to power your way through room full of splicers.

But don't worry about being *too* powerful. "Ten years have passed in Rapture," Weir reminds us, "and the splicers have all evolved. Some are very powerful. For example, there's this new splicer, the Brute, and he's pretty freaking hard to beat. It's not just like run-of-the-mill cannon fodder." The AI behind the game has also grown up. In our playtest, we spotted splicers ducking behind cover and peeking around corners, and we had to contend with a lot more vertical movement as they ricocheted around the rooms. On top of that, you'll still encounter new Big Daddies and, of course, Big Sisters (yes, there's more than one)—both of which we took on in tense yet thrilling battles.

Why lift weights when you can splice instead? The Brute likes the juice, as you can clearly see.

Welcome to Six Flags Rapture... er, Ryan Amusements. You must be *this* tall to enter the park.

2 Will I still recognize Rapture after a decade away?

Yep—and that's a good thing. The game begins in Ryan Amusements: a theme park/propaganda machine built by Andrew Ryan to "educate" children about the harsh realities of the surface world. It's a pitch-perfect reintroduction to Rapture—a bit of nostalgia at hearing Andrew Ryan's voice again, and a genuinely amusing peek at Ryan's funhouse-mirror view of society. It's Rapture through and through, with the biggest changes being the subtle yet obvious effect of an additional ten years of decay and societal breakdown.

That not only brought us back to a world we *wanted* to revisit, but also allowed us to focus on the changes that a decade of splicing wrought on its inhabitants. After shooting down a housewife, for example, we noticed that her foot had mutated into a fleshy shoe with a thumb-like protrusion replacing the high heel. "That's something we tried to put a lot of effort into—having visuals that matched what people wanted to do to themselves in terms of plasmid modification," Weir says. "You want to see the corruption, and how far they've gone, but you want it to feel tragic."

But it won't just be familiar settings with oddly pathetic genetic mutants. Later levels will offer a much more dramatic showcase of the passage of time. "There are a few locations in the city that have been completely flooded for ten years and now drained, and you see evidence of weird ocean life and decay that grew back into the ocean," says de la Plante. "It doesn't even look architectural anymore." Even the outside ocean areas aren't pristine; the effects of ADAM will be evident on the underwater flora.

3 With the Ryan family gone, who (and what) will take their place?

The first thing to remember: *BioShock* wasn't meant to be a condemnation of the philosophy of objectivism. It was all about extremism—and Andrew Ryan's obsessive desire to promote the individual over everything else led to the utter breakdown of society. What could possibly replace this? Enter Sofia Lamb, the high priestess of a new cult of collectivism. Her goal is to build the ultimate society that places the "greater good" over the individual need. The problem? "It sound nice for everyone to cooperate and be nice to each other, but when you take this to its extremist, logical extent, it becomes monstrous and dysfunctional," says de la Plante. In other words, it'll require a whole lot of genocide to get everyone to agree. Genocide that you can either help stop or take part in. Either way, it's heady stuff—the perfect BioShockian intellectual foundation to support all the killin' that's about to go down.

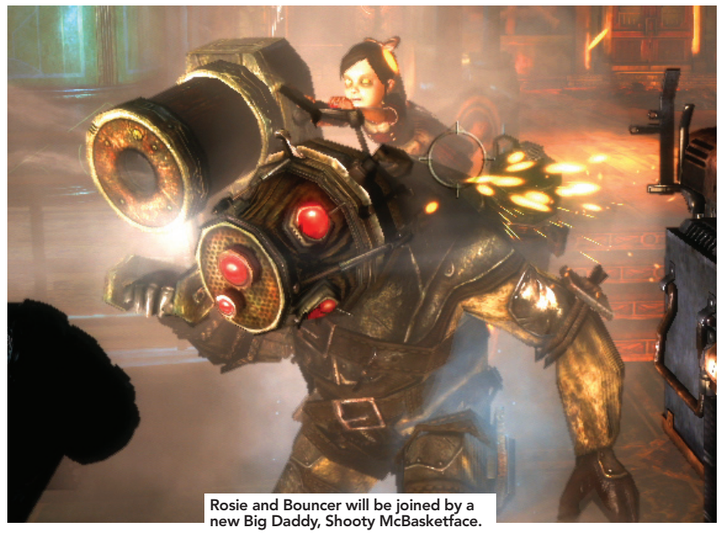
Rapture has a little Lamb.

"It's sort of a religious war between people who like multiplayer, and people who like single-player."
–Lead Environment Artist J.R. Hogarth de la Plante

4 Multiplayer: Will it work, or will it actually detract from the experience?

This one's hard to answer without having spent enough quality time in multiplayer. But, for the record, we love that it's a prequel, set during the civil war that roiled Rapture before the first game began, and that it includes narrative elements that extend the backstory. Also enticing: having a persistent character with a promised reward at the end of the experience. That said, we can't help but worry about the casual nature of *BioShock 2's* multiplayer—not because it won't be fun, but because we might have little reason to revisit it once we finish our first few tours through every map.

As for the larger concern? "The idea that it takes away from the single-player game is so weird to me," de la Plante says. "We've made a great single-player game. It's sort of a religious war between people who like multiplayer, and people who like single-player. But the single statement that I'll say about *BioShock 2* multiplayer is that the *BioShock* toolset—which has interesting ammo and plasmids that allow you to do interesting things with the environment—is so fun, why would you *not* want to use that in a multiplayer setting? Wouldn't it be awesome to set guys on fire and then shoot them with rivets?"



Rosie and Bouncer will be joined by a new Big Daddy, Shooty McBasketface.

5 Would you kindly give me a decent ending?

As if that final boss battle in the original game wasn't awful enough, we were then treated to a lackluster ending, capping off an incredible experience with a dollop of mediocrity. This time around?

"Let me just say, we know we didn't accomplish what we wanted to the first time," admits de la Plante. "The ending of the first game was just so binary. It was really heavy handed. This time it's definitely not so in your face. And there are multiple endings—*real* multiple endings. It's much more subtle and poetic and elegant. And ambiguous."

And what about that boss battle? "We learned that the team that worked on the original *BioShock*—I being one of them—wasn't so good at boss battles," de la Plante concedes. "And we started to evaluate whether a boss battle was really what we wanted to do. It didn't hold up to the rest of the game…and that's about all I want to say."

Why I won't* be playing Modern Warfare 2

Servers are the lifeblood of multiplayer on the PC. Why is *Call of Duty* taking them away?

THINK OF YOUR FAVORITE server. Maybe it's a Dallas-hosted, 24/7 cs_office *Counter-Strike* hub with the AWP disabled; a *Team Fortress 2* setup with stock settings and perfect ping; your clan's password-protected *Battlefield 1942* hangout. Your favorite server is your favorite pub, bowling alley or bookstore—it's a space to occupy, a shared set of hard drives and hardware that earns meaning and memory as its visitors create it over time with headshots, come-from-behind wins, impromptu clan showdowns and voice chat antics.

Without servers, multiplayer shooters lose a valuable sense of persistence. Server visitors form dynamic communities: as a group, they accumulate favorite maps, moments—seasons of gaming that change with content updates and as players come and go. You have rivals on your favorite server; you have a favorite medic, pilot, mode or admin. One of the reasons I'm a PC gamer is because I believe those intangible experiences are more valuable than a streamlined, unmodifiable multiplayer suite.

That's why I—along with so many other PC gamers—was outraged when Infinity Ward revealed its plan for *Modern Warfare 2*'s multiplayer: In the absence of any support for dedicated, third-party-hosted servers, the game uses a system called IWNet, a proprietary matchmaking/multiplayer service that lets players create private matches and playlists, or form a party with your friends and migrate between games.

Matchmaking systems feel nomadic to me; migrating between games doesn't produce the same sense of ownership over a space that a server does. But my personal tastes aside—locking players into a system like IWNet ignores an established and inherently valuable aspect of our platform.

On paper, it's sensible business for Infinity Ward and Activision, the game's publisher. Uniting gamers in a company-owned, symmetrical multiplayer "platform" will make doling out $10 map packs all the more lucrative; if there aren't any mods or user-created maps in the wild, the developer becomes the only source for content expansion.

Infinity Ward and Activision may be set on making *Modern Warfare 2* the best-selling game of all time, but there are plenty of other developers that deserve the time and money I invest in multiplayer because they've demonstrated respect for the precedent for community interaction, competitive play and user-fashioned experiences that dedicated servers have set for more than a decade. Ultimately, matchmaking and ease-of-use aren't the "features" that sustain multiplayer communities—it's the people you're playing with. **EVAN LAHTI**

*Well, I'm *going* to (hey, it's our job to be aware and familiar with every game on the market), but will I migrate away from the comfort and familiar rosemary musk of my favorite *Team Fortress 2*, *Counter-Strike*, *Arma II* and *Battlefield 2* servers? No.

VITALS
DEVELOPER Infinity Ward
PUBLISHER Activision
RELEASE Out now
LINK modernwarfare2.com

the spy

Since Mozambique in '63, The Spy can't watch two processions of troops marching endlessly into a giant bloodbath without feeling a Pavlovian twinge where his mandibular arch used to be. Bad news for The Spy, then.

CYBERSTALKING

The human shadow they call IceFrog, who has been developing the custom *Warcraft III* scenario *Defense of the Ancients* since 2005, has just been hired by Valve. The Spy knows only too well that *DotA* casts players as RPG heroes on a battlefield where streams of AI troops perpetually clash. The most intriguing detail of this shady acquisition—announced by IceFrog and since confirmed by Valve—is that the refrigerated amphibian is already "leading a team" at the Bellevue, Wash.-based developer. The Spy's time cyberstalking the nocturnal activities of Valve employees has uncovered many closet *DotA* fans in their ranks, so IceFrog's appointment almost certainly signifies a game of the same format in production.

FORGET THE PAST

The back cover synopsis for the next *Elder Scrolls* novel was recently leaked online. It bragged that the tale "partly bridges the gap for the next game, which is set 200 years after the *Oblivion* crisis." It has since been taken down. That time gap isn't as surprising as it might sound. (Certainly not as surprising as The Spy's missing decade in Pyongyang.) *The Elder Scrolls* games aren't ordinary sequels; each is about a new hero unrelated to the last, and the events of previous games are generally tucked away in dusty in-game books, if they're mentioned at all. They are, after all, ancient history.

BLOW MOTION

Jonathan Blow, engineer of time-twisting platformer *Braid*, is seeking a programmer to do some "very interesting work with full-body motion tracking." Blow, whose last game did most of its business on Xbox Live, is likely alluding to the involvement of Microsoft's Natal technology: a full-body motion tracker. Microsoft has referenced a desire to bring the device to PCs. Spy out.

SPY ILLUSTRATION: DAVID LYTTLETON

+++ PCG0110 EYEWITNESS +++

Tunnel Vision

In the ruined subways of Metro 2033, the last humans are fighting demons. And each other.

RUSSIA HAS A DARK PAST. "They've been through a revolution, millions dying at the hands of Stalin, 20 million dying in the Second World War. Their whole world view is this mixture of brutalized modern-day existence and these themes and folklore from the past," Huw Beynon, *Metro 2033*'s global brand manager, tells me.

Metro's premise is an extension of this history: the Moscow subway is the world's biggest bomb shelter. When the nukes dropped on the surface, the people waiting for or riding the trains were the only survivors. Humanity started over.

Your character, named Artyom, is one of them. Artyom has only known a world cobbled together from the bits and pieces that were left over—one where fellow survivors have split into different political and religious ideologies, finding refuge in different stations. They make deals with each other, they make war on each other.

The setting is based on a book of the same name by author Dmitry Glukhovsky. His novel was published for free on the internet, and it still became a huge seller. And unlike other apocalyptic fiction, there's no happy ending on the horizon, no comic relief moments in *Metro*. There are no wacky, arm-flailing robots. Everything is against you. Russians view the apocalypse almost like the opening of hell: whatever mankind does, it'll awaken mystical, unknowable forces. When Artyom signs up to guard a caravan delivering goods to another station, this is precisely what he meets.

In our initial demo, Artyom is shuttling down the train tracks on a hand-cranked cart with some other survivors when things go sour. His crew collapses, Antyom's vision blurs. Then the demons attack. Whatever the creatures are, they have psychic powers.

It's a scripted sequence: fighting off hellspawn as the cart inches its away toward the safety of the other station, swapping between weapons and hopping from side to side and front to back, blasting at the fearsome critters. Guards at your destination wait with flame-throwers, and when the cart slides past they let rip, toasting the demons to death with their handmade weapons. It's a sequence attempting to deliver the same level of polished, story-on-a-leash action as *Modern Warfare* or *Half-Life 2*.

There are no wacky, arm-flailing robots. Everything is against you.

That's a bold hope, and perhaps too ambitious for any developer to achieve with their first game. But then again, *Metro* seems like the best possible creative progression for a group of developers that left their jobs at *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* to make it; *Shadow of Chernobyl* was, at its worst, a directionless game—*Metro* is a narrower, more tailored, more precise, scripted experience.

In that sense, we're slightly worried that *Metro 2033* will box players in a bit too much, both physically and in terms of choices. The story follows the novel closely enough for one to be considered a spoiler for the other, and setting a game in subway tunnels means that there's inherently less room to maneuver. Even when you come to the stations, you're not going to be able create a huge space to fight in. And the above-ground areas are awash with radiation, which means there's little opportunity for the player to deviate from a carefully laid path, or come up with clever tactics when facing demons in combat. But if 4A games can find the same claustrophobic-yet-flowing approach to level design that *BioShock* did, all will be well.

At the very least, *Metro*'s setting may be as much of a thematic asset to the game as Rapture was to *BioShock*. Glukhovsky's book is a critique of Russian society, reflected in the stations: capitalists, communists and Nazis vying for meager resources. When humanity most needed to come together, the groups splintered, each taking possession of one of the stations that Antyom will have to pass through to complete his mission.

We're optimistic about *Metro 2033*. Visually, it's one of the most impressive things we've seen all year—4A Games' proprietary graphics engine manages to suffuse a world that's naturally dark and rusty with vibrance, detail and emotion. **CRAIG PEARSON**

Scavenge teams are vital to humanity's survival in *Metro 2003*. Recovering material from the surface is the only way to keep civilization going.

The crowded metro stations are filled with music, makeshift stores, and families.

Above: communication with other stations is rare, but essential. Right: Unused 7.62mm ammunition is the currency underground, which you'll be needing a lot of.

VITALS
DEVELOPER 4A Games
PUBLISHER THQ
RELEASE Q1 2010
LINK www.metro2033game.com

Wait, this is a browser game?

Sports games swing back to the PC in Tiger Woods PGA Tour Online

THIS IS HOW EASY IT IS TO BEGIN PLAYING *Tiger Woods PGA Tour Online*: Go to tigerwoodsonline.ea.com, sign in, download a small plugin, and then give yourself a moment to take in just how good a browser-based game can look.

This is the future of sports games on PC, and it makes perfect sense. After all, having a central browser-based hub hosted by EA gives players a single destination for leaderboards, forums, new courses and tournaments, the swing trainer and the pro shop. (Yes, the pro shop; while much of the game will be free-to-play, *Tiger Online* will be monetized by an as-yet-unannounced combination of microtransactions and a tiered-subscription model.)

However, the magic of *Tiger* doesn't really hit until you click "begin match" and you see not only beautifully rendered greens, water hazards and sandtraps, but also diverse trees in the background along with fluffy clouds floating miles beyond the mountain ranges. Graphics settings are flexible enough, however, that the game will run just fine even on a netbook.

The gameplay will be familiar to any fan of the series, and both classic Three-Click and *Golden Tee*–style TrueSwing controls are back. Out of six courses planned for the late-2009 launch, five were available during the closed beta, including big names like Pebble Beach and St. Andrews.

But one of the most exciting new features in *Tiger Online*? The ability to quit and resume games at any point. Whether you're about to tee-up or are in the middle of a shot, the next time you launch the game, it'll pick up precisely where you left off. Which means if you've got spare time, you've got a tee time. **ERIK BELSAAS**

Tiger's wearing his golfing socks. The pair with a hole in one.

Famous courses like St. Andrews (above) and Wolf Creek (below) are faithfully recreated in *Tiger.*

VITALS
DEVELOPER EA Tiburon
PUBLISHER EA
RELEASE Late 2009
LINK tigerwoodsonline.ea.com

Should I have mentioned the dual-axes in the personals ad I sent out? Oops...sorry.

Unfortunately, you are too overpowered as a dragon and cannot attack ground units.

Here be dragons

VITALS
DEVELOPER Larian Studios
PUBLISHER cdv Software Entertainment
RELEASE January 2010
LINK www.divinity2.com

How will Belgian RPG Divinity II: Ego Draconis separate itself from the pack?

HE KNEW THIS WAS COMING. Before Swen Vincke can even open his mouth to teach me how to play his game, I do what anyone would in my situation: Jump off the nearest cliff. I move gracelessly from a double-somersault into a freefall, but just before I become a pancaked hero, Vincke saves me, jabbing at the keyboard. I'm floating. I'm a dragon. I'm hovering over a chasm, ready to inflict fiery terror upon my foes.

Shapeshifting into a dragon is only one aspect of *Divinity II: Ego Draconis*. Larian Studios is taking the kitchen sink approach to their upcoming fantasy RPG, tossing in everything from a customizable battle tower laden with personal servants to a *Spore*-like companion creature creator. But the most important feature? "Depth," says Vincke.

> Shapeshifting into a dragon is only one aspect of *Divinity II*

"Most quests in *Divinity II* have 20 solutions each," he boasts. But don't worry about getting lost among the game's branching trees. Thanks to your hero's dragon ancestry, you can read minds (basically, trading some XP for a hint). In one encounter, a guard told me about a possible location of a bandit camp. From here I could ask the guard for the location, find it on my own, or mind-read a bandit for the exact position. Then I could decide whether I wanted to raid the camp myself, call in some reinforcements, or enter the camp neutrally, stumbling onto an abundance of side-quests unavailable if I chose the other options.

Vincke was at the helm of Larian when it released *Divine Divinity* in 2002, an isometric hack-n-slash RPG that was one of the last of its kind. Larian has undoubtedly made *Divinity II* a next-gen game, but can it compete with heavyweights like *Dragon Age*? Vincke is confident. "There's not a lot of action-RPGs with questing depth, choice and complexity," he says. "But it'll still be accessible to all players." **PRENTICE GEDE**

THE 17-WORD PREVIEW*: STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT

Я секретный агент Учёрта на куличках. Ни зги не вигно. Мутацие радиоактивние собаки заморят червячка. Меня.

*Warning, may translate into more than 17 words. Also, may translate into gibberish, depending on how well Erik remembers his college Russian.

+++ PCG0110 EYEWITNESS +++

GAMES ON TRIAL

HYPE. Interminable intro screens. Lying loading bars. Idiotic PR stunts. Excessive reliance on super-soldiers. Patches that decimate savegames. Boring tutorials. Ask any gamer and he'll come up with a list of offenses that wind him up on a regular basis. Our criminal justice system is woefully unprepared to confront these issues, so *PC Gamer* is taking the law into our own hands, singling out the most controversial issues in order to exonerate the innocent, and dispense harsh frontier justice to the guilty. ¶ All rise. The court is now in session.

The rogues of gaming are called to defend themselves. PC Gamer wields the mighty hammer of justice.

Quick Time Events

Prosecution: Games are interactive. Games are about feeling awesome, being awesome, and doing awesome things. Do Quick Time Events live up to this promise? No, they do not. Ever since *Dragon's Lair*, their place in the slurry of hated game elements has been one unbroken string of player frustration, on the part of players so brutally murdered for failing their challenge, and of developers, pathetically staggering after the Hollywood dream.

Defense: Your honor, the prosecution's argument is intrinsically contradictory. Would it prefer, for example, a cutscene with no interactive elements? How exactly does *removing* an interactive element from a game result in an *increase* in interactivity? With QTE, a developer can in fact choreograph our awesomeness, and cut loose with scenes that keep us on the edge of our seats instead of kicking back to watch a movie.

VERDICT: GUILTY

Sentence: Offenders to be locked in a room, and forced to hit each other in the X until only one remains.

BOSS FIGHTS

Defense: Bosses are the exclamation marks of gaming punctuation, their defeat resulting in the tender rush of relief after the orgasmic combat high.

Prosecution: I would answer that a boss fight testing my skill, challenging me to use all I had learned in a fair fight against an extra-capable opponent would be a thing of beauty. Yet this is not how such fights go, as we all know. Instead, we're asked to shoot a KILL ME light three times or following some contrived battleplan against a beamed-in irrationally invulnerable boss.

VERDICT: NOT GUILTY

Sentence: But only because there have been enough good bosses that the blame must lie with individual games. The court is looking at you, *Arkham Asylum*.

Linearity

Prosecution: In the early days, it made sense for games to be locked down and limited. But have games like *Deus Ex* and *Fallout 3* taught us nothing? Can my opponent give me one single solitary reason why we should accept being restricted to a few simple corridors and pre-planned emotions, when we could as easily be charting our own path through a whole world of imagination and excitement?

Defense: I will give the opposing counsel three. A linear path is easier to balance. The action and set-pieces can be all the more exciting. The player always has a fixed goal, instead of being left to stumble hither and yon toward the next point of interest. I won't argue that some leeway can be a good thing, but we buy games for an experience, and often that experience is best conveyed through something more like a theme park ride where the good stuff is served up, rather than a camping holiday that makes you hunt for the game you wanted.

VERDICT: NOT GUILTY

Sentence: Linear and sandbox games can both be amazing experiences, and there's plenty of room in the industry for both.

RESTRICTED SAVES

Defense: Your honor, when we grew up, a new game was something you'd play for months. When you died, it was back to the start, no arguments or appeal. We earned our victory, we broke our games

over the bent knee of experience, and we wore their corpses as our trophies. How can we complain that a new game today is "only" 12 hours long when, by using saved games, we've turned it into nothing more than a series of moments?

Prosecution: Once again, my opponent lives in a fantasy world—and not a good one like Azeroth, but a sad little plane in a universe shaped like a smelly basement circa 1986. The average gamer merely wishes to enjoy their purchase on their own terms. The more hardcore among us are certainly capable of eschewing the quick save. But the rest of us want to play on our own schedule.

VERDICT: GUILTY

Sentence: Offender's life savings to be revoked. Once the offender has recovered financially, the life savings are to be revoked again.

Silly Sexiness

Defense: Cue the moral outrage over chainmail bikinis and oversized boobs. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, let us not be addled by well-meaning but wrong-headed attempts to be politically correct. Games are escapism. Fantasy. A little sexiness—a bit of elan—adds spice to our existence.

Prosecution: My opponent fails to understand the problem. Nobody is saying that games can't be sexy. There's nothing inherently wrong with Amazonian supermodels bouncing around the battlefield. It's all about the context. The problem is when crop-top power armor, swollen bosoms and moist lips are the default design, rather than merely one of many stylistic choices open to a developer.

VERDICT: GUILTY

Sentence: Art directors to be forcibly stripped down to a thong for the rest of their natural lives. See how they like the cold.

Games for Windows LIVE

Games for Windows Live

Defense: Your honor, I...

VERDICT: GUILTY

Sentence: Death

MMO NEWS

Middle-earth for the masses

Siege of Mirkwood brings faster combat and shorter sessions to Lord of the Rings Online

IN CASE YOU MISSED THE MEMO, accessibility is the new big thing in MMOs. From bite-sized gaming morsels to easing up on the grind, developers are finally realizing that no matter how awesome their content may be, if the vast majority of players don't have the time or inclination to experience it, it's not a complete success.

Enter *LotRO*'s newest expansion, *Siege of Mirkwood*. "We're not forging ahead and leaving the world behind," explains Executive Producer Jeffrey Steefel as he escorts me through the new areas on my Champion. "But play styles have changed." The core element of this effort is the new Skirmish system: instances designed to be completed in little more than half an hour—or "during lunch with friends," as Jeff puts it. These instances scale with party size (solo, three, six or twelve players) and a designated level range, can be set to one of three difficulty levels, and feature highly randomized elements to keep them fresh for players.

And we're not talking your typical random elements like a treasure chest in this corner or that; we mean full-blown secondary objectives popping up, like the one that has your group fighting desperately against waves of incoming Orcs until your dying breath. (The expansion has nine possible secondary objectives in total.) Bosses, labeled "Lieutenants" in skirmishes, are also randomized, with different combat mechanics each time you fight them.

Soldiers, *LotRO*'s new companion NPCs, turn this 2-man squad into a party of 4 to bring down this enemy Lieutenant.

But the biggest change are the NPC sidekicks, called Soldiers—think of *Guild Wars*' companion system, but with a whole lot more personality and customization. Your Soldier is persistent, only exists inside skirmishes, and can be upgraded with skirmish points. Customization options include race, gender and clothing; and you can even specialize their role as a Tank, DPS, or Healer. Some upgrades for your sidekick will boost your character's stats as well. Once you step into the instance and summon your Soldier with a blow of a horn, the AI takes over so you don't have to hassle with controlling him or her. Or, if you prefer to micromanage, you can easily specify targets for them.

Of course skirmishes aren't the only new things in the expansion (they just happen to be our favorite). Turbine's giving players options to tweak the animation styles between twitchy, hard cut animations or fluid, blending movements. Instant attacks now interrupt auto attacks, fixing the long-standing issue that makes the current combat system feel clunky and slow. The level cap is being increased, and you can bring your legendary weapons (which level independently and can be named and socketed with relics) all the way to 65 with you.

JOSH AUGUSTINE

VITALS
DEVELOPER Turbine
PUBLISHER Turbine
RELEASE Out now
LINK www.lotro.com/mirkwood/

Changing the world

Dominion expands the EVE Online universe, giving you even more ways to rule the galaxy

AN MMO AS COMPLEX AS EVE ONLINE HAS LONG FORCED rookie pilots to learn the ropes on their own, but thanks to the recent inclusion of sorely needed tutorials on exploration and system navigation in the most recent expansion, *Dominion,* they can finally travel the stars without tearing their hair out. That not only helps with *EVE*'s notoriously steep learning curve, but it's even more essential now that there are over 50,000 planets for players to explore.

But the meat of *EVE Online*'s expansion is for the dedicated high-level players. The Sovereignty system is undergoing significant adjustments aimed at changing the way players control space into a more "tactical, capture-based system" that requires a higher level of strategy. Now, smaller groups of players can have a greater impact on the outcome without the drawn-out battles and facility construction currently required to seize control of a territory. Once a system is captured, your actions will begin to alter the system on a very fundamental level. Mine minerals in the system and you'll start to "uncover" more lucrative mining belts nearby. Gun down enough NPCs and you'll draw more diverse NPCs out of hiding. Utilize wormholes and you'll open up more connections in the system. Of course, the more you upgrade a system, the more a rival corporation is going to want control of it, so don't forget to upgrade your defenses along with the resources. JOSH AUGUSTINE

VITALS
DEVELOPER CCP
PUBLISHER CCP
RELEASE Out now
LINK www.eveonline.com

PvP reaches a whole new level in *Dominion* as Alliances battle to control the planets of the galaxy.

MMO BITS

Conspiracy quiz

A recent quiz on *The Secret World*'s website asked players to answer a few questions to determine which of the game's secret societies they're best suited for. A few groups rooted in the real world were included, like the Illuminati and Templar (the "might makes right" bad boys and righteous crusaders, respectively), as well as a brand new society sure to spark speculation on over-zealous conspiracy theory forums all over the internet: Dragon, by far the most long-lasting, secretive and spiritual of the three.

Choices, choices

There's been a lot of talk circling *Global Agenda*'s pricing structure. Will it be subscription-based? Will it be a one-time boxed purchase? Apparently, it's whichever you prefer! Players who want to participate in the crafting and resource-management systems or in the large-scale Alliance vs. Alliance battles that alter the persistent world will need to pony up a monthly subscription of $10–$13/month (depending on subscription length), while players who don't mind their multiplayer matches not having a long-lasting impact on the persistent world can get by with just picking up the boxed copy of the game for $50.

Vote for Josh

You might not think your parents joining Facebook is such a bad thing when they're the only ones consistently voting for you to become supreme dictator of Earth, thanks to Sid Meier's latest addition to the *Civ* franchise: *Civilization Network*. With it Sid wants to bring "everything you enjoy in *Civ*" to a fully persistent environment on Facebook, free of charge. You'll be able to lobby friends and family (aka pester them with annoying invites) to win elections and form your own government as you compete against other non-friends on Facebook to construct the world's premiere civilization.

A modest proposal

Square Enix is hoping to lure more *Final Fantasy XI* lovers to the altar with an update aimed at simplifying the game's wedding system. We'll withhold judgment on the virtual Romeos and Juliets meticulously tweaking the wedding's location, props and ceremony dialogue, but our basic understanding of math makes us skeptical that players can really create an "infinite variety of ceremonies."

To good friends, and bad pizza!

Online gaming isn't social. FASA's founder and father of *MechWarrior*, Jordan Weisman, has a plan to reintroduce face-to-face gaming with mainstream technologies.

JORDAN WEISMAN

IS MAKING: *MechWarrior* (piranha-games.com/mechwarrior.html), *Nanovor* (nanovor.com)

PROJECTS CREDITED: "It's too long a list to include everything but it includes: *BattleTech*, *MechWarrior*, *Shadowrun*, *Crimson Skies*, the invention of ARGs (Beast, ILB, etc), *Mage Knight*, *HeroClix*, *Pirates of the Spanish Main*, co-author of New York Times' bestselling novel *Cathy's Book*, *Arcane Legions*…"

CURRENT TITLE: Smith & Tinker CEO and Troublemaker

FAVORITE MECH: "Gotta cheat on this one by naming two. My first favorite was the Atlas because it captured the look and feel of the original BattleTech, and then when we were creating the clans I fell in love with the MadCat."

FAVORITE CAR: "From the time that I was 16, my dream car was a 1952 MG TD. I finally got one when I moved to Seattle 10 years ago."

FAVORITE GAMING MEMORY: "I was 14 the first time I played D&D. At the time I could barely read because of dyslexia, but the game so inspired me that I forced myself to read those damn rules and all of Tolkien, by the end of which I could read reasonably well."

CALL ME OLD-SCHOOL, but to me gaming is never better than when you're in the same room with those that you are playing with/against. Admittedly, this may be a factor of age. After all, I have been creating games and game universes for almost 30 years, and when I started there was no other way to explore a dungeon, fight a dragon, or become a star fighter pilot than at table with bad pizza, strange looking dice, and most importantly—good friends.

Don't get me wrong, I love online games. I led the invention of the very first network game available to the public in 1988, with the BattleTech Center. I later worked with Kesmai to create the first persistent MMO in the early '90s, back when people had to pay $6 per hour just to be online. More recently with the creation of the Alternate Reality Game (ARG) genre (The Beast, I Love Bees, etc.) I explored massive collaborative gaming and storytelling structures. So, in short, I have been experimenting with gaming and socialization over wires for a long time and can appreciate its enormous benefits. But…

In our quest for virtual socialization, we have inadvertently created so many incentives to socialize remotely that in-person gaming isn't competing.

I'M MORE AND MORE CONCERNED about the decline of truly social face-to-face gaming. In our quest for virtual socialization, for all the right reasons, we have inadvertently created so many incentives to socialize remotely, that in-person gaming and entertainment isn't competing. For instance, a friend told me that recently her high school-age son's soccer team had a couple of free hours between practice and a game to hang out, but they couldn't come up with anything to do that was as rewarding as what they could do online. As a result, they all went to their own separate homes so that they could get back together and "hang out" virtually.

With *Nanovor*, Weisman aims to bridge the divide between online and offline play.

SINCE ONLINE PLAY PROVIDES ever-fresh content, retention of accomplishments, the enhancements those accomplishments bring (and of course the ability to connect to a wide social circle), it's clear why we're drawn to online socialization and play. The real mystery is why can't we bring most of those benefits to our in-person social play?

That's the crux of what we are attempting do for younger gamers with our *Nanovor* project—to bring together all the benefits of online play with the excitement of playing together face-to-face. In *Nanovor*, players can collect monsters online, battle them, evolve them, trade them and download their *Nanovor* monsters to a custom piece of hardware called a Nanoscope. All use of the Nanoscope offline is recorded and uploaded to the corresponding online accounts, so that offline face-to-face play has all the benefits of online play.

Since all of us older "kids" are carrying little super-computers in our pockets, why can't we continue to connect to the games and universes that we love? Obviously an iPhone, Android, or other smart phone is constantly connected, and is there when you're hanging out with friends. We should be using these devices for more than portable flash games and micro-apps; we should be creating integrated extensions of the games and universes that we already care about. Better yet, we should create new types of games that capitalize on the unique energy of a being at a table with bad pizza, web connected supercomputers in everyone's hands, and most importantly—good friends.

THIS IS OUR STAND!

How we thrive in Dawn of War II's survival mode

WE LOVE *THE LAST STAND*. When Relic added a survival mode to *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II*, it relit our interest in one of our favorite RTS titles of 2009. *The Last Stand* sets three player-controlled heroes against waves of 40k's worst alien threats, mutating the game into a kind of sci-fi, score-based *Diablo* for three players. Here's how we play it.

EVAN, Eldar Farseer
Roles: Defender, delayer

- **RUNES OF WARDING** Shields up! Temporary invulnerability for me or a friend.
- **PISTOL OF THE WARSEER** A weak-ass popgun, but it boosts melee and movement.
- **SPIRIT STONE OF ILLUSION** Incite panic! Half of the on-screen enemies become temporary traitors. Essential for managing late-game waves.
- **RUNES OF THE WARP** "Beam us the hell out of here, Eldar!" Group teleports endangered allies across the map.

Eat levitating energy bubble, space bugs!

We're totally boned, aren't we?

ERIK, Space Marine Force Commander
Roles: Medic, assassin

- **DREADNAUGHT** A giant, autonomous, bipedal guardian. Known around the office as "The Mechanical Kool-Aid Man of Ruination."
- **RITE OF THE TIRELESS CRUSADER** Save! Revives a teammate instantly, with full heath and short-term invincibility.
- **ARTIFICER ARMOR** A marine's only as tough as the ancient shell he's wearing into war.
- **PLASMA PISTOL** Slow-firing sidearm that debuffs enemies' armor.

DAN, Orc Mekboy
Roles: Crowd control, insanity

- **BURNA** Cook 'em. Melts Tyranids before they can leap.
- **BOUNCY SHIELD** *Orc, enter thy hamster ball.* Any enemies in reach of the shield are repelled away. Good anti-melee.
- **REACTIVE TELEPORTER ARMOR** Enemy melee attacks trigger random teleportation.
- **ROKS** "Yo, asteroids!" Calls in a hail of space stones that bury anything gathered around the Mekboy.

Huh? I can't hear anything over this AWESOME FLAMETHROWER!

LIKELIHOOD OF OUR DOOM

WAVES 1-8
-6%
A warm-up. A good time to prepare tea.

WAVES 9-13
14%
A variety pack of orc threats, marines, and Tyranid Zoanthrope psychic artillery.

WAVES 14,15
31%
Annoying Eldar Banshees, Shuriken Cannon turrets, orc rocketeers.

WAVE 16
76%
Mirror match! Fend off identical versions of your three heroes.

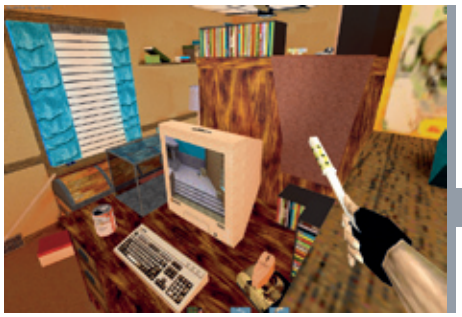
WAVE 17-19
68%
Mechanized terrors. Fight buzzsawing orc walkers, then *seven* Dreadnaughts.

WAVE 20
134%
Oh *#&$.

Maude's Mods

Got no time for idle chat folks—I'm up to my knickers in mods and that wash ain't gonna wring itself out. But if you've got mods you want old Maude to check out, just send an email to letters@pcgamer.com with Maude's Mods in the subject line, and they'll pass it on to yours truly.

From vintage classics to new-fangled upstarts, PC Gamer's mod correspondent reports on the best of the mod scene from a shaded lawn chair at the Three Knuckles Mobile Country Club in Pahrump, Nevada.



ACTION QUAKE 2

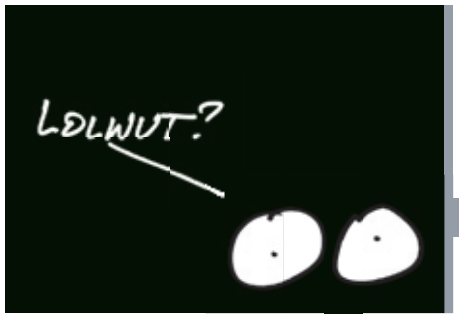
GAME REQUIRED: **Quake 2** | SINGLE PLAYER OR MULTIPLAYER

Action Quake 2's a silly, gaudy, slapstick brawl on the surface, but underneath lies a ruthless bastard of a game. That's what makes it so satisfying to play: Every shot is devastating. In the head, they die. In the body, they'll bleed to death if they don't bandage. In the legs, they're crippled. The weapons include superbly weighty throwing knives, and the maps range from rooftops to bedrooms bigger than my whole trailer. **action.telefragged.com**

DYSTOPIA

GAME REQUIRED: **Half-Life 2** | SINGLE PLAYER OR MULTIPLAYER

I saw *Tron* at the drive-in when I was a young lady. I couldn't tell what was going on because me and Cletus had to watch it standing on milk crates peeking over the fence, but it sure looked a lot like this shiny mod for *Half-Life 2*. Use your thermal vision to spot enemies, then pick them off with your laser sniper rifle while your team's cyberdecker (we call 'em hackers) slips by, jacks into the enemy terminal and zooms through a 3D representation of a computer network, bypassing security and deploying payloads. **www.dystopia-game.com**



BLIND MONK'S SOCIETY

GAME REQUIRED: **Half-Life 2** | SINGLE PLAYER OR MULTIPLAYER

I know monitors ain't got ears but I was boxin' 'em anyway because I couldn't see a durned thing after I installed this mod. That's when Gwen told me "giiirl, that screen's *supposed* to be blank!" Well blow me over a haybale if Gwen wasn't right. *Blind Monk's Society* is a mod you play with headphones or a fancy 5.1 surround-sound system, and you learn to navigate and interact with a world that you can't see, just like the blind monks helpin' you out do. And there's a heap of Monty Python-style humor to go with it. **bit.ly/Ach45**

JAILBREAK

GAME REQUIRED: **Unreal Tournament 2004*** | SINGLE PLAYER OR MULTIPLAYER

That special feeling when your trailer is the only one left standing after a nasty storm? It's different in *Jailbreak*, because your neighbors aren't gone from the game when they die—they're locked up in a pokey at some enemy base. And that means you have to elbow your way in there and hit the switch, turning you not just into a hero but the leader of a bloody counter-attack. **bit.ly/4Nr0E**

*(coming soon to *UT3*)

VITALS
DEVELOPER and PUBLISHER Zombie Cow Studios
RELEASE 2010
LINK zombie-cow.com

Ben and Dan's excellent adventures

The madcap duo returns in Revenge of the Balloon-Headed Mexican

YOU'VE SEEN IT IN COUNTLESS MOVIES and TV shows: writers huddled together in a bar, chatting away while furiously scribbling down notes. But these writers aren't working on the next great novel or screenplay. Instead, they're building a new PC adventure game.

Meet Dan Marshall, who founded Zombie Cow Studios in the summer of 2008 and has since worked closely with his high school friend (and in-game counterpart) Ben Ward. "We have funny, nutty conversations," says Marshall about his barroom chats with Ward. "And it turns out that if you put those bizarre situations into a video game people are willing to pay actual money to play through them!"

That was certainly the case with their first release, the indie hit *Ben There, Dan That.*

Both their initial game and its sequel, *Time Gentlemen, Please!*, were designed from the ground-up to make people laugh. And if LucasArts has taught us anything, that's where the adventure genre excels—which is why the choice to go point-and-click was "a no-brainer." Both games do their fair share of poking fun at the classics, but also draw their comedic inspirations from the various British sitcoms of the '80s and '90s, including *The Young Ones, Spaced* and *Black Books.*

In its short life, Zombie Cow Studios has turned out four games as well as announcing a fifth: *Revenge of the Balloon-Headed Mexican*, the third installment to the *BTDT* series. This time, however, they're looking to mix up their own formula, announcing that *Revenge* will be moving "away from the overtly parodic nature of the first games" and that "people will be able to jump straight into *Revenge* without worrying about what's happened in previous installments."

Revenge also marks the beginning of an episodic direction for the series. "We can play with the characters and the puzzles a lot more in a shorter game, where doing something crazy and outlandish is less likely to completely break everything," Marshall explains.

Outside of revealing that you'll be able to split up the Ben and Dan duo and swap between the two at will, Marshall is tight-lipped about what else falls into the "crazy and outlandish" category. "We've got a *great* idea for episode two, but we'll see how *Balloon-Head* does before getting too excited. I'm not going to make the mistake of talking about it, because it'll all probably change."

MAX MCGEE

THE ADVENTURES CONTINUE

If you dug *BTDT* and *Time Gentlemen, Please!* (both available on Steam), Marshall has a few recommendations from the PC adventure scene. "It's mostly amateurs doing what they can with zero budget and a lot of love, but occasionally there's a real gem that's well worth looking into."

Nelly Cootalot
bit.ly/2yHlfQ

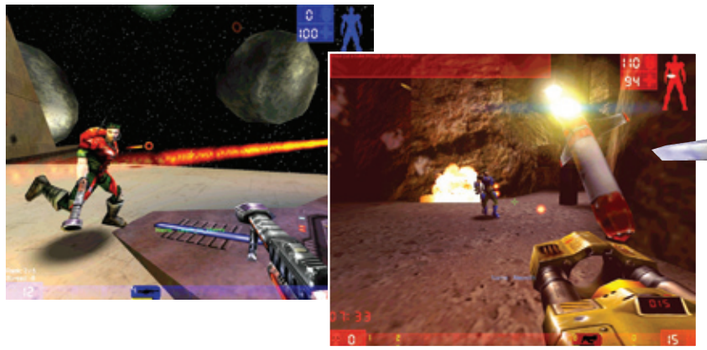
Nanobots
livelyivy.com

Beauties and Beasts
crabshackgallery.com

PCG REPLAYS THE GREAT GAMES OF OLD

SHOOTER SHOWDOWN '99

QUAKE 3 vs. UNREAL TOURNAMENT



The Panel

LOGAN
EXECUTIVE EDITOR
"I still laugh every time I dash through a hailstorm of my opponent's innards."

EVAN
ASSOCIATE EDITOR
"Hey, remember my 3:1 kill/death ratio on *Quake Live*? Couldn't've done it without you guys."

PRENTICE
INTERN
"I am the baron of InstaGib."

ERIK
INTERN
"What's the UT announcer voice guy up to these days?"

A decade later, what's our favorite hardcore shooter of PC gaming's greatest era?

EVAN Christmas 1999 was PC gaming's ultimate heavyweight fight. Let's take a moment to appreciate it—two of the most influential, evenly matched and equally anticipated multiplayer shooters of all time released within three days of one another. It may not ever happen again. And in that year, both represented the pinnacle products of top-tier developers: with *Quake III* backboned by John Carmack's mad-science zeal for efficient engine tech and mouse-breaking gameplay pace and *Unreal* anchored by breathtaking level design, sheer variety of ways to play and things to shoot (remember the redeemer and the flak cannon?).

But which game plays better in 2009? And more importantly, considering the new mechanics each introduced (*Quake*: air-strafing; *Unreal*: secondary firing modes), which does "gaming today" owe more to?

LOGAN I'd have to say *Quake III*, but that could be sentimentality. I mean, I associate deathmatches in general with *Quake*—it was the first game I created a LAN inside my house for. In terms of graphics, sound, gameplay and technology, *Quake III* meant that multiplayer deathmatch had finally *arrived*. Everything after that has been just polish.

ERIK But which would you rather play *right now*? More than *Quake*, I think, *Unreal Tournament* is just filled with *moments*. There's nothing like leaping into low-grav space with your sniper rifle, and sorta-accidentally headshotting a guy across the map. It's fundamentally satisfying. *Quake III* just moves too fast and the weapons are too generic to have those kinds of "I can't believe what I just did" moments.

EVAN No, but wait—that's the idea. *Quake III* wants to be a sport—and it's probably the closest thing to an athletic experience gaming will ever have. If we're talking about character movement, weapon balance, bunnyhopping—this is the shooter's shooter. There's no ceiling on skill. Revisiting it, even on *Quake Live*, you see how well *Quake* rewards frantic, bionic reflexes.

PRENTICE I think *Quake* is just a perfect one-on-one experience; far more fluid in terms of the weapons and movement than *UT*, which has a lot more "design for design's sake." The maps are more thematic, the alternate firing modes don't necessarily add a lot. The Assault (attack/defend) maps are less impressive than I remember, and I loved those as a kid—Operation Overlord feels claustrophobic and much shorter. There's certainly something to be said about the bot AI of *UT* and customization through the mutators, but as a true test of skill, *Quake* comes on top.

EVAN And that's the appeal I'm getting at—*Q3* could be an Olympic event. It's the modern duel: your skill, your awareness, your improvisation with the rocket launcher—at the rawest level, *your ability to make a line intercept* (your shot) *with a moving point* (the enemy) is completely what propels the experience—more so than game mechanics like score or flag capture. Every session is an exercise in mental efficiency: when you're jabbing WASD every quarter-second to make adjustments, spinning your mouse to check your back at every spare moment, counting down the seconds before quad-damage refreshes, you feel like this constant stream of algorithms, physics equations and percentages are crunching through your head.

ERIK I think we can agree that *Quake III* has better core gameplay, but I still think *Unreal Tournament is* a better overall experience. The mutators, level design, weapons and soundtrack simply create a more diverse environment. Nothing says fun like accidentally spraying a BioRifle all over the walls of some 15-mile-high skyscraper. That's an experience you can't get out of *Quake*.

LOGAN The BioRifle? WTF? It's like fighting with radioactive cottage cheese. I usually take more damage to myself with that weapon than to anybody else. But don't we think that the guns are another no-contest? *Quake*'s shotgun, rocket launcher, railgun seem downright frumpy compared to *UT*'s flak cannon and the rewarding crack of the sniper rifle. OK, *Q3*'s lightning gun is fantastic, but then again, so is running out of ammo and reducing somebody to pulpy bits with a kamikaze lunge of the impact hammer.

EVAN Frumpy? If gaming weapons had a museum, that rocket launcher would have its own wing, fountain and restaurant menu item.

10 YEARS LATER: THE VERDICT

	UNREAL TOURNAMENT	QUAKE III
Developer	Epic Games	id Software
Publisher	GT Interactive	Activision
Release	November 30, 1999	December 2, 1999
Weigh-in	650 MB	490 MB
What we said then	"Brainy bot AI," 90%	"Frantic," 80%
Best weapon	Flak Cannon	Rocket Launcher
Best map	Morpheus	Q3dm17
Best mode	InstaGib	Deathmatch
Greatest gift to gaming	"Headshot!"	Being a vehicle for player skill
Annoying trait	Over-designed levels	User interface
In one word...	"M-m-m-m-monster!"	Pure

Which is worth playing today? On a Facebook poll, readers said: 62% *UT*, 38% *Quake III*. As shooter fan David Murphy puts it: "*Unreal Tournament* is great because it really helps estab...BOOM HEADSHOTTTTT!"

In space, no one can hear you lose your credit rating.

SPACE

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

One of PC gaming's oldest genres—the space trader—rises again

SPACE FLIGHT SIMULATORS FLIRTED dangerously with extinction as intense real-time strategy, first-person shooter and role-playing games took over in the 1990s. But 25 years after the primitive wireframe graphics of *Elite* spawned a generation of space flight sim fanatics (and became one of the inspirations for *EVE Online*), the call to navigate, exploit and thrive in the hostile frontier of space is winning back PC gaming fans. Here are three new and upcoming games for eager space traders.

MINER WARS

Elite on a collision course with *Asteroids* seems to be the inspiration for *Miner Wars* (right), which pits players against each other and the collapsing interiors of giant fully destructible asteroids, as they mine and shoot their way to space victory. With single-player as well as cooperative and multiplayer modes, having a knack for trade as well as combat will serve you well in these parts.
www.minerwars.com

BLACK PROPHECY

This interstellar MMO (above) from the makers of *Neocron* is heavy with the years of leftover ideas from a hundred space games. Combining fantastic visuals with lots of fiddly menus and complex space interactions, this could well be the kind of future for gaming spaceflight that the *Elite* generation had imagined. A brooding atmosphere and dramatic backstory doesn't hurt its prospects either.
www.blackprophecy.com

INFINITY UNIVERSE

Often accused of being little more than vaporware, the vapors from this work-in-progress are nevertheless intoxicating. Able to generate entire planets on the fly, *Infinity* takes the procedural principles of *Elite* (creating unique worlds with minimal resources) and applies them to today's hardware. If it ever comes out, you'll be able to explore a truly universe-sized universe, trading and exploring seamlessly from space to land.
www.infinity-universe.com

release meter

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING 0110

Cowboy boots are for men. When cowboy boots go stomping down a hall, it strikes fear into the hearts of everyone. When cowboy boots go stomping into developers' offices, they scream release dates to appease you. Lucky for you, we had a pen and paper on hand.

Q4 2009

The Saboteur	EA

Q1 2010

Aliens vs. Predator	Sega
Assassin's Creed II	Ubisoft
BioShock 2	2K
Dark Void	Capcom
Divinity II: Ego Draconis	CDV
Global Agenda	Hi-Rez Studios
Just Cause 2	Eidos
Mafia II	2K

Mass Effect 2	EA
R.U.S.E.	Ubisoft
Singularity	Activision
Sins of a Solar Empire: Diplomacy	Stardock
Splinter Cell: Conviction	Ubisoft
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Star Trek Online	Atari

LATER 2010

Alpha Protocol	Sega
APB	EA
Arma II: Operation Arrowhead	505 Games
Battlefield 1943	EA
Brink	Bethesda
Command & Conquer 4	EA
Deus Ex 3	Eidos
Elemental: War of Magic	Stardock
Fallout: New Vegas	Bethesda
Guild Wars 2	NCsoft
Homefront	THQ
Max Payne 3	Rockstar
Napoleon: Total War	Sega
Rage	EA
Red Orchestra: Heroes of Stalingrad	TBD
Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Split/Second	Disney Interactive
Star Wars: The Old Republic	EA
Supreme Commander 2	Square Enix
Warhammer 40,000 Dawn of War II: Chaos Rising	THQ

WIN!

WHAT'S INSIDE:
CASE Chimera Inferno
CPU Intel i7-870 @ 2.93GHz
CPU COOLER Asetek Liquid Cooler
MOTHERBOARD Asus P7P55D Pro
MEMORY 4GB DDR3-1600
VIDEO CARD ATI 4890 1GB
HDD Intel 80GB SSD, 1TB HD
OPTICAL LG Blu-ray Reader
PSU NZXT 800W
MEDIA 12-in-1 Card Reader
OS Vista Home Premium 64bit
KEYBOARD/MOUSE Ibuypower Keyboard/Mouse
DISPLAY Asus 23.6" Widescreen LCD Monitor

A FREE GAMING RIG from PC Gamer!

Ring in the New Year with new hardware and Intel's hottest new processor!

IN THE VERY NEAR FUTURE, one lucky *PC Gamer* reader is going to be opening two boxes. Inside one is a Gamer Paladin PC from Ibuypower with Intel's new Core ™ i7-870 2.93GHz processor. Inside the other is a shiny 23.6-inch widescreen LCD from Asus. And when they get put put together and fired up, that special somebody is going to be playing all the awesome games of 2010 in extreme style.

All you have to do to be that lucky gamer is to sign up as fan on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/pcgamermagazine*. Yes, in this great country of ours, it's that easy to win $2,200 of free stuff. And if you're already a fan of *PC Gamer* on our Facebook page, well done: You're already entered to win!

Intel on the Core i5 and Core i7 family of processors

"Intel is excited about our new Lynnfield line of processors—Core i5 and Core i7. To show how excited we are we are giving away over a dozen CyberPower and Ibuypower systems to the readers of the tech reviewers who put the products through their paces daily! 'Core i for the mainstream guy (and gal)' is what we affectionately call it, bringing the Nehalem architecture to mainstream PC pricepoints everywhere. Our awesome e-tail partners below helped make this happen, hit them up when you go shopping for a system. And special thanks to CyberPower and Ibuypower for delivering the goods yet again."

TIGERDIRECT www.tigerdirect.com/go/corei5
NEWEGG.COM http://promotions.newegg.com/Intel/corei5/index.html
ZIPZOOMFLY.COM http://www.zipzoomfly.com/jsp/Special/Intel_p55_launch_083109.jsp
MWAVE.COM http://www.mwave.com/mwave/inteli5.asp?
NCIX.COM http://www9.ncix.com/lp2/Corei5-P55/ca/

*Hi. It's Mr. Asterisk—you knew I'd show up—with some basic contest rules. Ready? No purchase is necessary to win. To enter you must become or already be a fan of *PC Gamer* on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/pcgamermagazine. One entry per person. You must become a fan no later than January 4, 2010. The winners will be chosen on or about January 5, 2010 and will be notified via Facebook or email. The odds of winning depend upon the number of entries received. The sponsor of the contest is Future US, Inc. ("Future US"), 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. One prize will be awarded, consisting of an Ibuypower Gamer Paladin PC and Asus 23.6-inch LCD monitor with a retail value of $2,200 (at press time). Winners will be determined by a single random drawing of all valid entries. This contest is open to legal residents of the United States only, excluding Rhode Island and Puerto Rico. Entrants must be at least 18 years of age. For a complete list of rules go to www.pcgamer.com/official_rules.

Star Wars

STILL A PC-EXCLUSIVE!

THE OLD REPUBLIC

Sparks fly from our fingers as BioWare invites us to join the Dark Side and unveils the final four player classes in their Death Star-sized MMO BY DAN STAPLETON

With his dying breath, a wise Jedi Master reveals to me that there...is...another...

...player class. Actually, there are four others, for a grand total of eight great hopes for the galaxy. And technically, he wasn't a Jedi Master; he's BioWare Austin's Lead Writer, Daniel Erickson…and he's not really dead. So what I told you is true, from a certain point of view.

Since last year's announcement of BioWare's ambitious *Star Wars: The Old Republic* MMO in our Holiday 2008 issue, four classes have been revealed: the Empire's Sith Warrior and Bounty Hunter, and the Republic's Smuggler and Republic Trooper classes. Now, BioWare has invited us to the LucasArts campus in San Francisco to take the wraps off of the four remaining classes, modeled closely after popular characters and archetypes seen in the films, through which BioWare says you'll be able to live out nearly* any *Star Wars* adventure fantasies you can imagine.

Who's your favorite *Star Wars* character? Go ahead, pick one, then turn the next few pages—odds are you'll find a class in *The Old Republic* that'll let you play as someone similar, and have comparable action-packed adventures with a party of friends or AI-driven companion characters. And even though *TOR* takes place 3,600 years before the events of the films, all of the key pieces are in place for your character to live out a story true to the name *Star Wars*: a Republic of free people, protected by the Jedi Order, battling for survival against an invading Empire of evil Sith Lords with blasters, lightsabers and the power of the Force.

*Sorry Jar Jar fans, you're out of luck.

VITALS
DEVELOPER BioWare
PUBLISHER EA/LucasArts
RELEASE 2010
LINK www.swtor.com

The Sith Inquisitor

Embrace the darkest parts of the Dark Side

UNLIKE THE SITH WARRIOR, WHO'S BORN AND BRED to be an elite Sith, the Inquisitor has more humble origins. During the first push of the war, the Empire seized many Republic worlds and enslaved their populations. A small percentage of those slaves were found to be sensitive to the Force and were brought to the Sith homeworld of Korriban in chains. There, the recruits will face trials to determine their value to the Empire. As a new Inquisitor, you must prove yourself worthy of the name Sith.

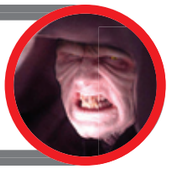
Daniel Erickson is the Lead Writer at BioWare Austin. Before joining the *TOR* team, he was Managing Editor on the *Dragon Age: Origins* story.

WHAT THEY SAY "The least Dark Side person is the Bounty Hunter; the *most* Dark Side person is the Inquisitor. This is our Palpatine character. This is where the game gets a little dark. The Inquisitor seeks the dark secrets of the Force; he's the person who tries to master the crazy creepy side of the Force, but also is able to handle the political side of things. We have these great dialogue scenes where you're halfway through trying to convince someone to do something, and they'll be saying 'I just don't know,' and you can be like 'DO IT!' and start electrocuting them in conversation. Because once you've established that you can electrocute people at will, you start to think, well, how often would I want to do that?" **DANIEL ERICKSON**

The Inquisitor is at his most powerful after shuffling his feet across heavy carpeting for a minute or two.

WHAT WE SAY Like all Imperial classes, the Inquisitor *can* be played as a good person living in an evil empire, doing good deeds while keeping up the outward appearances of being a Sith Lord. But seriously—you get to electrocute people *during dialogue*. How can you pass that up?

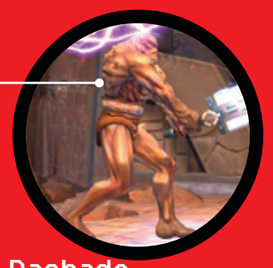
INSPIRED BY Emperor Palpatine



Erickson says there will be many styles of lightsaber, but lightwhips will be added over his dead body.

MEET THE MINIONS

Each class has a set of companions unique to their storyline. BioWare introduced us to two that will join the Inquisitor's team, available to swap in for quests when you think you'll need their strengths.



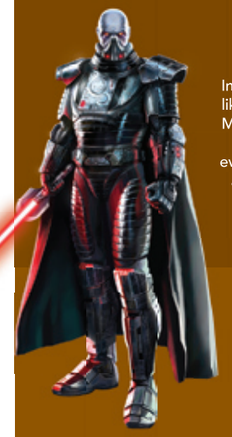
The Dashade

Around eight hours into the game the Inquisitor meets this tank-type character with a natural resistance to the Force, making the Dashade the perfect addition to your party if you plan on going Jedi-hunting. Send him in to absorb all the Force damage while you sit back and let the lightning fly.

Xalek

Much later in the game you'll encounter a young Kaleesh (same species as General Grievous, but not cyborgified) who will become your apprentice. A Sith Padawan, if you will. (Do the Sith have an equally dorky term for their trainees?) He fights in the Darth Maul style, which Erickson describes as a "whirling dervish," dealing high damage. The way you treat your own trainer at the start of the game will completely change the course of events that lead to Xalek joining your party.

Previously Announced...



Sith Warrior

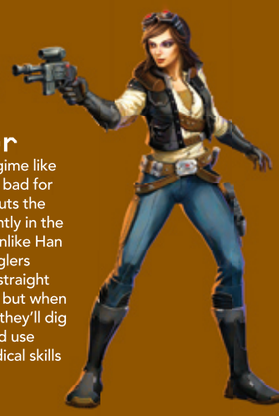
Inspired by vicious fighters like Darth Vader and Darth Maul, the Sith Warrior is all about inflicting pain on everything in his path. He's a big fan of Force Choke, but mostly lets his lightsaber do the talking.

Bounty Hunter

TOR's mercenaries work for the Sith Empire, but they don't care which way the war goes. They can't use the Force, but in *Episode II*, we saw Jango Fett fight Obi-Wan Kenobi to a draw using specialized weaponry like rocket launchers and flamethrowers.

Republic Trooper

Anything, even a Force-using Sith, will go down if you apply enough heavy blaster firepower. The Republic Trooper is polishing his tank-like battle armor in anticipation of that challenge.



Smuggler

An oppressive regime like the Sith Empire is bad for business, which puts the Smuggler reluctantly in the Republic camp. Unlike Han Solo, these smugglers prefer to avoid a straight fight with stealth, but when the job goes bad they'll dig in under cover and use black-market medical skills to tough it out.

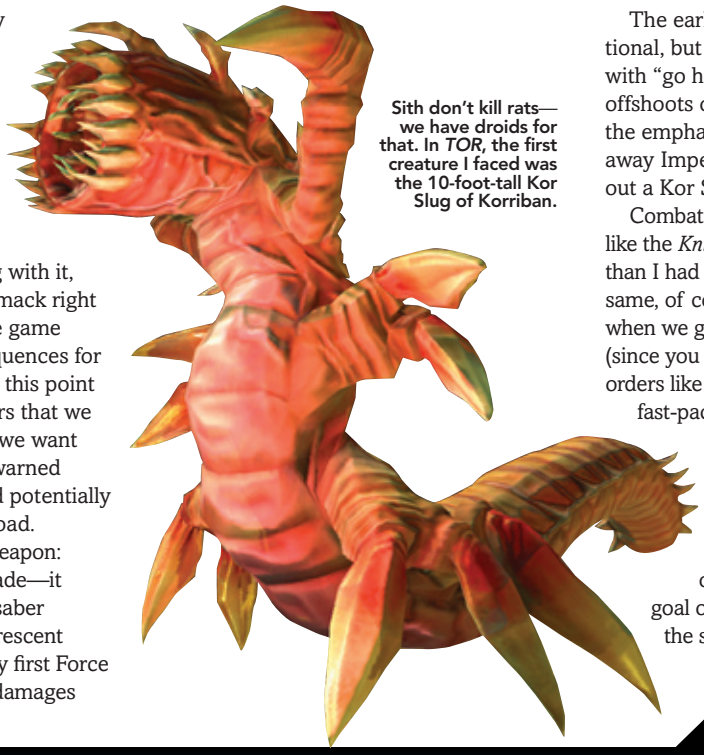
That thing's operational!

Hands-on with the first levels of the Sith Inquisitor story

SITH OVERSEER HARKUN IS shouting at me and my fellow recruits like the slave trash we are. The Empire has no use for pansies, even Force-sensitive ones, he told us, and we must seek out a Sith hermit named Spindral within an ancient Sith tomb to be judged.

The apoplectic overseer was the first thing I saw after creating my Inquisitor—a skinny dork that looked a bit like *Watchmen*'s Ozymandias—and setting foot on the Sith homeworld of Korriban. When Harkun paused to berate me, the *Mass Effect*-style dialogue system popped up and gave me the option to kiss his boots, passively go along with it, or be an arrogant jerk and talk smack right back to his face. This early in the game there were no immediate consequences for insolence—Erickson says that at this point they're just trying to teach players that we have the ability to say whatever we want to whomever we want—but he warned that angering the Overseer could potentially have an implications down the road.

I had to laugh at the starting weapon: I was equipped with a training blade—it looked a lot like a fan-made lightsaber constructed from black-light fluorescent tubes. But, in conjunction with my first Force power—a blast of lightning that damages and stuns—it got the job done against my initial enemies: overgrown intestinal parasites called Kor Slugs and bands of smugglers attempting to loot ancient Sith artifacts from the tombs. Brutal slashing and stabbing finishing moves made me all the more eager to upgrade to my first legit lightsaber.



Sith don't kill rats—we have droids for that. In *TOR*, the first creature I faced was the 10-foot-tall Kor Slug of Korriban.

So far the action is fast-paced and feels distinctively like *Star Wars*

The early quests were nothing sensational, but the way they were structured—with "go here, kill that" quests as optional offshoots of the quest to find Spindral—kept the emphasis on story, and even the throwaway Imperial grunt who asked me to wipe out a Kor Slug nest was fully voice acted.

Combat and dialogue in *TOR* plays more like the *Knights of The Old Republic* games than I had expected. It's not exactly the same, of course, and things will change when we get our first companion characters (since you can't pause to give them specific orders like in *KOTOR*), but so far the action is fast-paced and feels distinctively like *Star Wars*. Most of all, *The Old Republic* feels like an attempt to build a bridge between the gameplay of BioWare's traditional single-player RPGs and the new world of MMORPGs, with the ultimate goal of settling into a spot that enjoys the strengths of both types.

Early lightning powers stun enemies, but BioWare leveled me up to level 8 so I could try one that siphons off my victim's life.

Using the Force in combat works a lot like most MMO abilities, but BioWare makes sure that each has a distinct and impressive animation and effect.

Jedi Knight

Time for aggressive negotiations

THIS ICONIC CLASS NEEDS NO INTRODUCTION—of *course* you're going to be able to play as a Jedi Knight! What kind of idiot would make an MMO set in the *Star Wars* universe and not have a Jedi class? (What's that? *Star Wars Galaxies* launched without playable Jedi? Oh, right.)

WHAT THEY SAY "The Jedi Knight is very much our action-hero guy. If we were just building a normal BioWare game, that would be our guy. The Consular and the Knight are not different builds; they are totally different stories. The Knight is the young Padawan who showed up and did amazing martial training, and everyone said 'This is Mace Windu, this is the new god with the lightsaber.'" **DANIEL ERICKSON**

WHAT WE SAY In a brief hands-on session with the Knight, I started on the recently rediscovered Jedi homeworld of Tython. I had no mission objective, but I *did* have a pair of lightsabers, the Force and a cavern inhabited by creatures called Flesh Raiders who—in case you hadn't guessed by now—raid the settlements of Tython and eat their inhabitants. With a tap of a key, my Knight charged into action with a leaping attack that closed the gap before the Flesh Raiders could react with their blasters, and clashed blades with their vibro-blades made of cortosis (a lightsaber-resistant metal). Like the Sith Warrior, the Knight uses basic lightsaber attacks to build up action points and gain access to his more powerful moves. After a couple of lightsaber slashes I executed a Master Strike, a vicious lightsaber move that ends in an impaling stab, finishing off the first raider. Using Force Push, I flung his friend against the cavern wall and watched him crumple into a heap on the ground.

The Jedi are powerful spiritual warriors who defend the Republic wearing backward Snuggies.

When Force Push comes to Force Shove, no one beats the Jedi Knight.

INSPIRED BY
Mace Windu, Anakin Skywalker

Ah, battle droids: the punching bags of the *Star Wars* universe since 1999.

Jedi Consular

Ally of the Force

SOME SITUATIONS CALL FOR A MORE THOUGHTFUL, less cut-you-in-half-with-a-lightsaber approach. In those cases, the Jedi Order sends in the Consular.

WHAT THEY SAY "He is the thinking Jedi—closer to being the 'gray Jedi.' He's the diplomat. He leans more toward the Force than he does toward the lightsaber, and it's a very different feel for how we go at it from a story perspective and a combat perspective as well. He has the cloud men's mind abilities; he's got telekinetics where he can pick people up and bounce them around, as well as a couple of normal lightsaber abilities. The general inspiration definitely came from the *KOTOR* Consular class, except that we wanted him to be a viable choice, unlike in *KOTOR*. In *KOTOR* it was like, 'Do you want to be the guy that's really good with the lightsaber that can kill everything all the time...or the other guy.'" **DANIEL ERICKSON**

WHAT WE SAY The Consular might be more of a pontificator than a pugilist, but he's still a combat-effective class. We watched him use Force Pull to knock enemies down and bring them within range of his lightsaber, then use another telekinetic power to lift them into the air and slam them back down into the ground. Erickson adds that these animations are interruptible. "You can absolutely bounce someone and then have a Knight Force Push them straight out of the air," he says.

INSPIRED BY
Qui-Gon Gin, old Obi-Wan Kenobi

Sith Agent

A license to kill (Jedi)

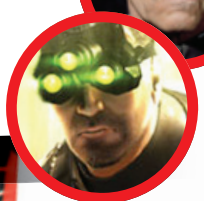
EVEN WITHOUT BEING ABLE TO USE THE FORCE, you can still be a force to be reckoned with. Relying on stealth and cunning, a Sith Agent can change the course of Galactic events without anyone even knowing he was there.

WHAT THEY SAY "The Sith actually represent a tiny percentage of people in the Empire. So who else do we have fantasies of being? Grand Moff Tarkin, right? Tarkin was the only guy in any of the movies except the Emperor who was totally unflapped by the Sith. And we thought 'OK, what would be fun with that? I don't want to be an old man in a stuffy outfit.' So the Imperial Agent for us is a little bit of *Splinter Cell*, a little bit James Bond. We go in and we do what has to be done. We are sent in for assassinations, we are sent in for diplomacy. We go in in disguise and under false pretenses." **DANIEL ERICKSON**

The voice actor playing the Agent slips in and out of an "Imperial" British accent to help him infiltrate the Republic.

Forget the Force—the element of surprise is the Agent's ally, and a powerful ally it is.

INSPIRED BY
Grand Moff Tarkin, Sam Fisher



WHAT WE SAY As an Agent, you'll get access to some amazing technological toys that help you tilt the odds in your favor before the battle begins, even against Force users. In a demo, BioWare showed us how using a stealth generator, you can get in close to a group of enemies without causing alarm, then dispatch a probe droid that will hide itself next to your target…and wait. Then you pull back, set up behind cover (like the Smuggler, the Agent can use environmental cover to reduce damage), and whip out your sniper blaster rifle for a powerful one-shot kill. Taking one foe down gets the attention of his buddies, who open fire on you. The hidden probe, sensing that the battle has begun, explodes violently, dealing heavy damage to the remaining enemies, making mop-up a breeze. Sure, you *could* just sneak up on someone and backstab him (or poison him with a toxic dart that'll drain his health without drawing agro), but the gadgetry approach seems like even more fun.

BANG Goes the MMO

Slick, urban and full of guns and cars, APB promises to be the ultimate online game of cops and robbers. BY GRAHAM SMITH

DAVE JONES' INITIALS are tattooed across my nipples. I have a mullet, a moustache, aviator shades and a belly that arrives in a room a few seconds before I do.

"Players are going to have to think very carefully about who they want to be," Jones tells me. "You can be a psycho, quiet, on-the-streets kind of killer. You can be a *Clockwork Orange* character, going around with classical music playing. It's cool that we can give people the power to be who they want to be." I don't tell him I want to be the guy with the nipple tattoos.

All Points Bulletin is a towering thing. A persistent open-world action game in a city of crime, vigilantes and haircuts. It's almost an MMO—cops and robbers with 100 people. It's the game David Jones has wanted to make since he left Rockstar North, the developer of the *GTA* games, to found a new company, Realtime Worlds, in 2002. "I loved making these kinds of open-world games. The idea of trying to build a big environment like a city and making it alive and as realistic as possible, then throwing someone in to have fun. At some point, I thought, we have to do that online."

But there was an obvious problem. "That was the idea when the company started, but even then people were still on dial-up internet connections. It was timing." It's now seven years later. To find out if the timing is finally right, I've come to Dundee, UK, to talk to Realtime Worlds and play its new game.

Before I get my hands on *APB*, the team shows me the character I'll be playing. It's not my muck-around fatboy from earlier in the day. It's *me*. The eyes are a little off, maybe, but they've created a remarkable replica from just a single photo. I'm even wearing a kevlar vest with a *PC Gamer* logo on it.

This was all done using the in-game character creator, which some players will no doubt spend more time with than the game itself. That's allowed. The city has three districts: the Waterfront and Commercial districts for combat, and a third social area, where people go to talk, organize and customize."We're about three core pillars: the celebrity, the creativity, the conflict," says EJ Moreland, *APB*'s lead designer.

BANG Goes the MMO

APB TURNS OUT TO BE the city of Tyra Banks' dreams. This is a place where people don't care whether they're good or bad, as long as they look cool doing it. Everyone has ridiculous haircuts, extravagant clothing and multiple tattoos. Everyone is on display. Your progress in this world is as much about making yourself look awesome as it is becoming more powerful.

In the game, I'm teamed up with three other players. Our team leader approaches a contact to get our first mission. Contacts are NPCs who offer jobs to Enforcers and Criminals, the game's two sides. Each has two subfactions with their own motivations and backstories, but the overall justification for the fighting is the city having put out a call for vigilantes to help maintain order. The Enforcers are far from traditional police officers.

> "You can be a psycho, quiet kind of killer. It's cool we can give people the power to be who they want to be."

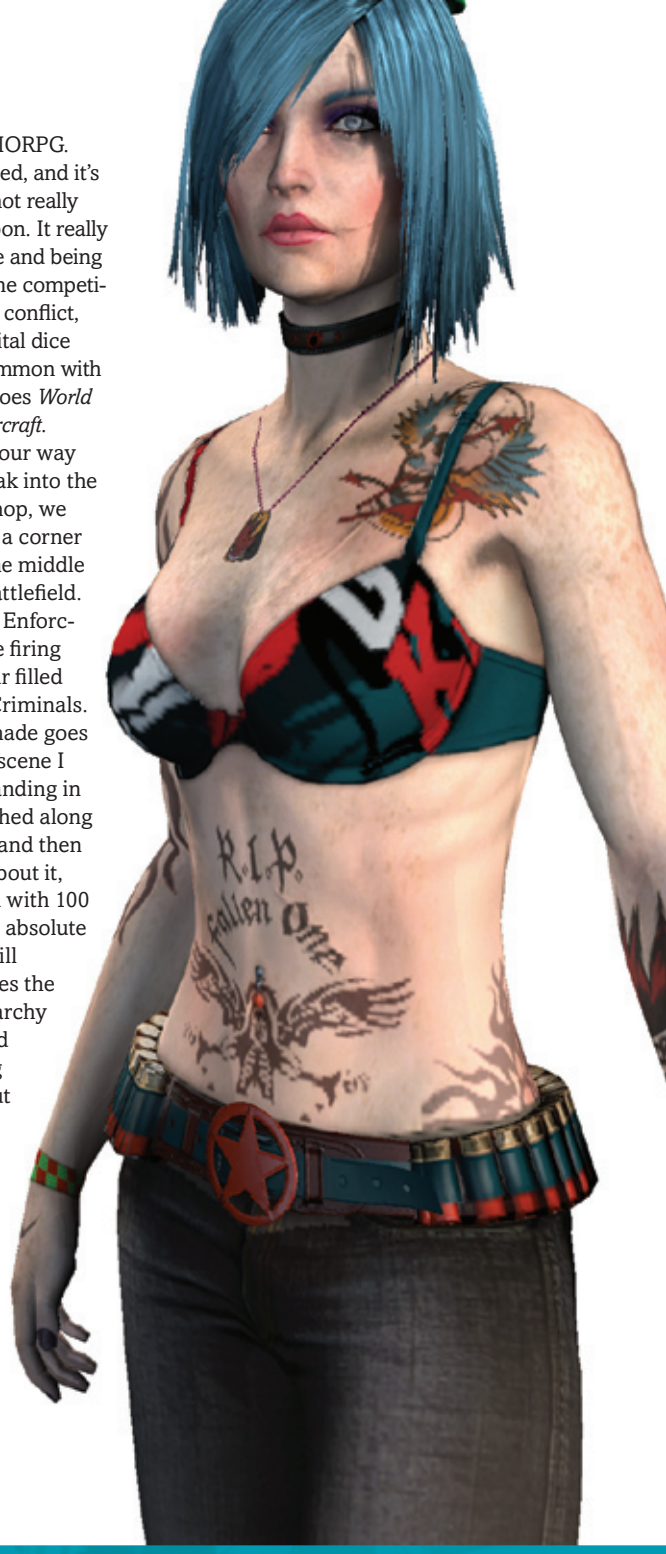
We're Criminals, and our first job is to burglarize some shops. Heading to the nearby car park, I hit a key to spawn my currently equipped vehicle. Just like weapons, cars are unlocked, bought and then assigned to a slot in your inventory. Once you've bought a car, it's yours forever, respawnable at car parks around the world. We hop in, and set off for the objective marker on the horizon.

"When I first came here everyone called it an MMO," says Moreland. "But what we wanted to make was something that was really fun and action based...When we realized there was a difference, we took a step back and tried to identify the core components that were important to us." The result: servers of 100,000 players split into districts—essentially instances—that each contain 100.

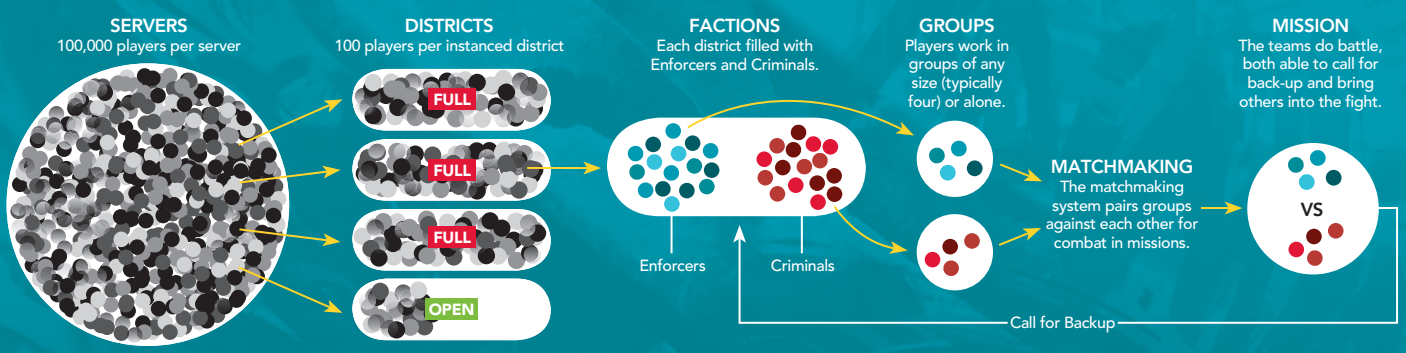
"Technically, if you look at the term, yes, it's a massively multiplayer game, but people have associated that to mean MMORPG. We're not that. It's a lot faster paced, and it's a lot more about player skill. It's not really about the next big +1 or +2 weapon. It really is about learning to play the game and being good at it, and a lot more about the competitiveness of that—the leagues, the conflict, the missions." That means no digital dice rolls. The combat has more in common with *Counter-Strike* and *Quake* than it does *World of Warcraft*.

On our way to break into the first shop, we round a corner into the middle of a battlefield. Three Enforcers are firing at a car filled with Criminals. A grenade goes off as we skid by. As we exit the scene I ram into one of the Enforcers standing in the middle of the road. He is pushed along with the car for a short distance and then slips off, unhurt. "People think about it, they're like, 'Oh yes, it's like *GTA* with 100 players,'" Jones says, "but that is absolute chaos. When anybody can just kill anybody in the city, in ten minutes the whole city just collapses into anarchy and people are just pissed off and shooting everybody and running everybody over. It can be fun, but it's a very different game."

So in *APB*, the only people you're able to hurt are those involved in the same mission as you. Arriving at the shop, there are a couple of markers, each a window that we need to smash in. This involves getting close, pressing F and waiting for a progress bar to complete while you use a crowbar on the window.



ANATOMY OF APB Finding your fun



BANG Goes the MMO

You'd think the girls could rob a clothes shop now and then.

I am watching myself break into a shop. This is eerie. A message pops up at the top of the screen: Two Enforcers have been sent after us. This is *APB*'s matchmaking in action. Enforcers can talk to Contacts and get missions the same way as Criminals, but they're also offered missions while on the move, telling them about Criminals that need to be stopped. The idea is that Criminals feed off the environment—breaking into shops, stealing cars, mugging pedestrians, causing property damage—while Enforcers feed off Criminals, capturing or, more commonly, killing them.

There was a concern early in development that Criminals would be cooler than the Enforcers. "Who the hell is going to play Enforcer? Surely criminals have all the fun," says Jones. But they took steps to compensate. "As a criminal, you can actually get matched against other criminals, so in some respects it doesn't really matter if there's too many criminals on a server. That's good, because as an Enforcer it gives you a lot of criminals to feed off." Enforcers also have a couple of toys the Criminals don't, such as less-than-lethal weapons. While a killed enemy has to wait roughly ten seconds before respawning, a less-than-lethal weapon just incapacitates them, giving the Enforcer a chance to perform an arrest, which knocks them out of the fight for 30 seconds or more.

Luckily for us, we're back in the car before the Enforcers arrive, on our way to the next shop in the mission. When we get there, we approach the correct area and, again, press F. Over the course of the day I'll repeat this process a lot for cosmetically different tasks: go to point A, press F. I take my concern over the limited interaction to Moreland afterward.

"THE MISSION IS ABOUT setting up a context for a fight," explains Moreland. "Now, that's not to say that the other part isn't important. We do have things other than hitting F on an objective. We have capture points, we have checkpoints, we have delivery missions where you pick something up and you have to keep it away from the other guy, we have escort missions, but we wanted to keep it very, very simple." Another shop successfully robbed, we begin to leave. There's another shop across town that needs robbing. That's when the Enforcers arrive.

We can stay and engage them, but there's a time limit to every stage of a mission. We scatter. Bullets fly around the alleyway as we scramble over wire fences. I get turned around and now can't remember where I parked the car.

> "If 50 uncoordinated people come after those four, they'll demolish those 50, they're so damn good"

APB's combat is defined by its city. When you're driving between locations, it's all wide-open roads, occasional ramps and plenty of scope for long-distance combat. But each objective is located either in an alleyway or a building. Thus objectives become focal points for

The Commercial district.

WWW.PCGAMER.COM

very tense, very action-packed combat. As a Criminal, you'll find yourself in the core, covering your friends and trying to guess where the Enforcers are coming from. As an Enforcer, you'll be trying to sneak up on the Criminals, to box them in and stop them escaping.

"If the combat is fun, then it doesn't feel repetitive," says Moreland. "We may be wrong there, which is why we're adding other things to do, but we think what we have is a good starting point."

The combat *is* fun, though I still have concerns. Mainly, that there's no location damage. A headshot does the same damage as a footshot; you simply spray enemies with bullets till they fall down. This lack of precision makes the guns feel weak.

"We don't have location-based damage because we feel it pushes the difference between a low-skill player and a high-skill player too far," Moreland explains. "If people universally want location-based damage, we're going to have to re-evaluate our decision." I hope they do. As I run around the street, trying to find a nice-looking car to steal, it happens for the first time. An Enforcer speeds along the road in his own vehicle and hits me.

AS I AWKWARDLY TUMBLE to the ground—to support slower internet connections, *APB* uses a simple physics model—my murderer's Kill Anthem plays. These soundbites, each a few seconds long, are played to your victim when you kill them. Some people use it specifically for griefing, and here it's a screeching, glitching mess of noise. You can turn off those who particularly annoy you, but this kind of institutionalized nastiness—such as waving at fallen enemies in *Team Fortress 2*—is funnier than the usual swearing and teabagging. After respawning and fighting our way to the final shop, we successfully rob it and complete the mission. My Rating increases, and some rewards are unlocked. These can be received by checking your messages at computer terminals around the world, and accepting your Contact's offer of cash and rhombus-shaped decals. Your Rating is one of the things the matchmaking system considers when pairing you with enemies, along with your Threat Rank, a temporary, less persistent measure of your recent success and kill-to-death ratio. The interface for displaying this information was unfinished when I played.

Players are also further measured by their Notoriety, which operates like *GTA*'s star system. Complete missions, kill enemies and cause havoc, and your Notoriety increases. At stages, rewards are unlocked. Hit Notoriety 5 and a bounty will be placed on your head, offering every other player on the server a mission to hunt you down. Jones describes the possibilities. "I fully expect a group of four really good players will go in, coordinate it so they all hit Notoriety 5 at roughly the same time, and then hunker down to see how long they can survive against potentially 95 other people on that server. They're going to boast that they survived 20 minutes."

In 2019, *American Idol* auditions are compulsory and enforceable by law.

Unsafe at any speed.

APB does a lot to encourage group play. Teams of four is the standard combination, and Realtime Worlds anticipates a lot of coordination: groups that dress in uniforms, compete for top spots on the various leaderboards (200 at launch), and work together to dominate a server. Clans, professional play—*APB* should support it all. If your group is ever struggling, your team leader will be given the option during a mission to call for backup. Do so, and a couple of other players on your side will be called to join in.

OF COURSE, YOUR ENEMY CAN DO THE SAME THING. Hypothetically, missions could escalate till they consume an entire district, pitching 50 vs. 50.

If territorial control is done well enough, *APB* could become a small-scale, first-person *EVE Online*. It's dangerous to be excited about a game based on what it might one day become, but it's impossible not to consider the possibilities.

Playing the game, it becomes clear that *APB*'s success is entirely dependent on its matchmaking being right. When fighting the QA testers, everyone was a higher level than me and my team. Our rating—measuring player skill and experience—had us at 12, where everyone else on the server was rated around a 70. This meant that, while there were four of us, we'd frequently be pitted against just two enemies. The system figured that, since they were higher level, just a couple of Enforcers might be able to take out the four of us. This resulted in combat that at times wasn't hard enough or fast enough or exciting enough. Whether *APB* ends up being good, or being fantastic, is going to be determined by the feedback Realtime Worlds gets from its closed beta, and its ability to react to it before release. (This includes the payment model, which has yet to be determined—but definitely won't be a monthly subscription fee.) Thankfully, Realtime seems to realize this, and the beta should run from now until the game's launch in spring 2010. *APB* feels like a game that's teetering on the edge of greatness. If Realtime Worlds gets it right, it's going to be spectacular.

VITALS
DEVELOPER Realtime Worlds
PUBLISHER EA Games
RELEASE Spring 2010
LINK www.apb.com

MAKE YOUR OWN GRAHAM

APB's powerful character creator in action

APB's character creator is powerful enough to make real life people in perfect detail. A single photo was used as a reference for me.

By playing with sliders for eye tilt, nose width and beard greatness, I am born. I have also acquired a *PC Gamer* kevlar vest and muscle tone.

The results in-game are both awesome and creepy. It's me, inside a game. Welcome to the uncanny valley, Graham!

"Snacks! Sandwiches! Ammo!"

REVIEWS

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

Left 4 Dead 2

Unpredictable undead and knuckle-whitening new competitive mode restore a pulse to co-op zombie-killing action

WHEN I HELD A SIX-PACK OF SODA AS AN IMPROMPTU MELEE WEAPON, I knew *Left 4 Dead 2* would treat me well. Clutching coke, my teammates and I were fleeing the "Save 4 Less" mini-mart we'd busted into moments ago. When we broke down the door, the store's damn alarm started acting as the dinner bell for dozens of lurching unpeople. This wasn't our idea of a good time. We owed a parched gun shop owner a favor—he'd let us walk away with of whatever shotguns, laser-sighted assault rifles and high-caliber pistols our "Take Item" key would let us carry just a few moments ago. We had to get him the coke. So I trotted on, gunless: wondering if too many melee attacks would over-carbonate the bottles, yelling at my teammates to cover my ass on the most insane, ill-advised escort mission ever attempted. I was running for my life, sprinting and screaming through piles of the living dead just so someone could sip the last soda on earth. ▶▶

HOW WE RATE THE GAMES

0-30%	31-45%	46-60%	61-75%	76-89%	90%+
INTOLERABLE	**WEAK**	**MEDIOCRE**	**FAIR**	**GOOD**	**EDITOR'S CHOICE**
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.	Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.	A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice even if you find it cheap.	A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.	Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.	Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, sirs!

The zombie outbreak is actually a mutated form of the cootie virus. *That's* why you don't let girls into the treehouse.

Common undead squish like ketchup packets.

Even *Kill Bill* didn't bleed this much.

Only thing worse than a carny is a zombie carny.

LEFT 4 DEAD IS STARVED for this kind of asymmetry. Even if it's something as unexpected as handing you a case of cola to relay as a game objective, the game needs moments that animate its game mechanics: objectives, scenarios and design that gets survivors moving through the environment. Movement guides all the good things *L4D2* does; the sequel is at its best when it's rewriting its own rulebook on where, when and how often undead threats can occur—pushing survivors (and player-controlled zombies) into creative situations that demand improvisation, adrenaline and flexibility. Valve wants to drag you, kicking and screaming, out of your comfort zone—and that couldn't be a more welcome approach. And the arrival of three new Special Infected types is a fundamental help to that: the Spitter, the Charger and the Jockey all contribute new harassment mechanics to the mix, creating terrifying new combos in conjunction with the four familiar types (the Smoker, Boomer, Hunter and Tank) that return unchanged. Facing seven possible forms of attack and a dizzying number of potential combinations means that even experienced players are more likely to be caught off-guard, and that uncertainty puts delicious fear into you every time you round a corner.

CHOP 'TIL THEY DROP

A few new tools will help you around those uncertain corners, though. Melee weapons are the most exciting change to combat. Clutching a katana blade, machete, guitar, chainsaw, police baton, cricket bat, frying pan, police baton or of course the signature Valve crowbar is guaranteed to put a mischievous grin on your face, and swinging like a madman helps you run headlong into hordes with confidence, defend doorways, mutilate climbing zombies and generally act like a lunatic. Cleaving away withered appendages shows off the awesome variety of zombie death animations, complete with gore-geous ragdoll physics and a new dismemberment system that models loss of limbs with satisfying perfection. Common infected become more than fodder—they're piñatas, existing to generously bleed, animate and fragment with mortal confetti.

THE CHOPPING BLOCK
A GUIDE TO ZOMBIE DISMEMBERMENT

HEAD A classic technique.

ARM This guy won't be the cover model for *L4D3*.

GROIN Direct hit! ...But no effect, Cap'n!

LEGS Let's see if that old earthworm experiment works on zombies...

TORSO I can see who he had for lunch.

LOCAL COLOR
EACH CAMPAIGN HAS A SPECIAL ZOMBIE TYPE WITH A UNIQUE ABILITY—HERE'S HOW TO COPE

HAZMAT
As seen in: Dead Center
Trait: Flame-retardant
Counter: Anything but fire

MUDMEN
As seen in: Swamp Fever
Trait: Muck up your screen when they hit; low to the ground.
Counter: Hit them from a distance

SWAT
As seen in: The Parish
Trait: Frontal durability
Counter: Hit them from the rear

HARD HATS
As seen in: Hard Rain
Trait: Earplugs. Pipebombs don't get their attention.
Counter: Boomer bile

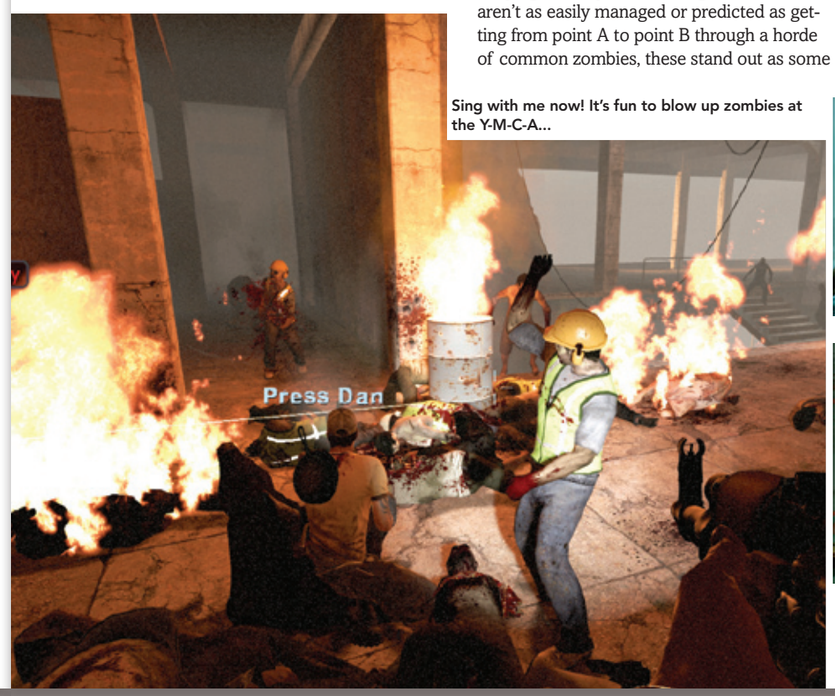
CLOWN
As seen in: Dark Carnival
Trait: Squeaky shoes; high likelihood of being your greatest childhood fear
Counter: Shoot their damn feet off

By constructing situations that aren't easily managed or predicted, these stand out as some of *L4D2*'s best moments

ZOMBIE KILL OF THE WEEK

There are nine or ten *fantastic* moments within the five single-player/co-op campaigns that are much more than just new weapons and new zombies. A crescendo in the "Dead Center" campaign has you making a soda run for a thirsty gun shop owner—essentially an escort mission with a six-pack of Coke. The finale of "The Parish" has you sprinting over a suspension bridge gridlocked with abandoned cars. In "Hard Rain" (my favorite overall) you navigate a kind of Witch minefield—an abandoned sugar factory with at least six of *L4D2*'s worst-manicured undead ladies wandering around, ready to claw the face off of anyone straying near. By constructing situations that aren't as easily managed or predicted as getting from point A to point B through a horde of common zombies, these stand out as some of *L4D2*'s best moments.

Of course, this is still a game founded on the same fundamentals we saw a year ago in *L4D:* getting through a level intact. The level design takes grand steps to broaden out the narrow corridors with more wide-open spaces and alternate paths. "Hard Rain" contains one of the best expressions of this: when you reach the end of a suburban and industrial area, you have to haul gas back the way you came through a sudden drenching downpour (controlled dynamically by the same AI director that controls zombie attacks) that reduces your visibility to a few feet. It would feel like lazy design, except that the streets are now flooded by the rain. Slogging through knee-deep water slows you to zombie-bait speeds, strongly encouraging your party to seek higher ground.



Sing with me now! It's fun to blow up zombies at the Y-M-C-A...

Running on the rollercoaster track is a wild ride.

Anyone got a moist towelette?

Your reward for survival is a cutscene of your dramatic escape. Well, that and you get to continue being alive.

When nature calls, even the undead must answer.

Infected are weak on their own, but deadly in packs.

BLOOD FOR OIL

Move your feet: that's *L4D2*'s first commandment. That killer finale battle of "Dead Center" I mentioned earlier sells it in a big way. Ellis, Coach, Nick and Rochelle stumble out of a safe room into a zombie-infested shopping mall's three-story promenade area, still draped with big blue banners pitching the mall's final promotion: "GET A PHOTO WITH JIMMY GIBBS JR.!" You don't know Jimmy? He's a famous raceman, group chatterbox Ellis reminds the Survivors in his southern drawl. Jimmy's ad-plastered stock car is enshrined on the ground floor, and it's your ticket out of here. The catch: the tank is empty as a zombie's eye socket.

This finale delivers the most dramatic fill-up you'll ever have. Cans of gasoline are scattered around on the walkways that ring around the plaza—you must retrieve them and carry them down to the car. On our first go, my team scrambles through a list of strategies. Could we spread out and grab the fuel as fast as we can (and take sniper rifles to cover each other from across the mall)? Should give the buddy system a shot, and divide into groups of two? What if we search the mall slowly as a pack of four, and toss the gas over the edge? Getting players moving in search of items does something fantastic: it kicks all of the game's mechanics into full motion.

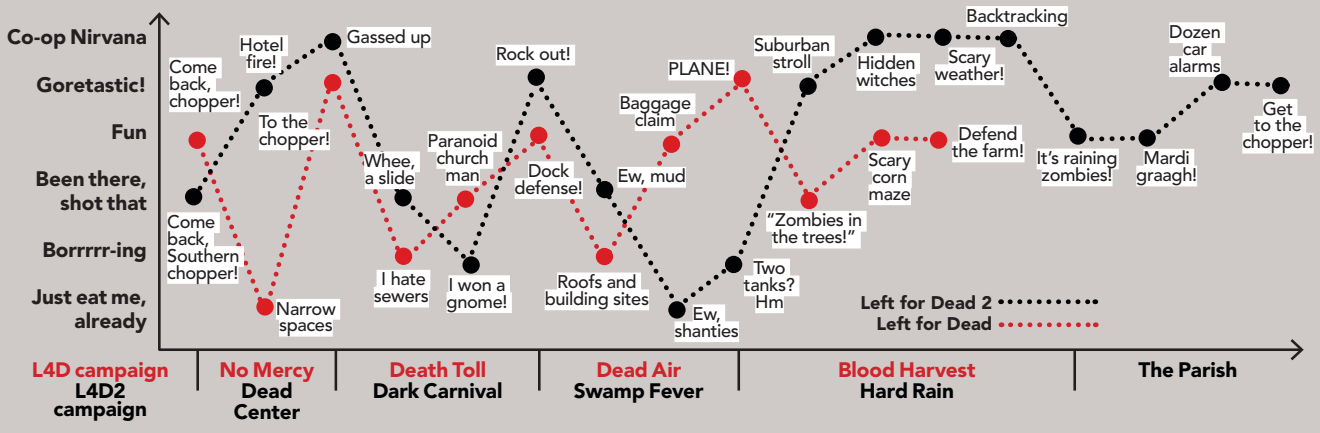
> The "Dead Center" finale is the most dramatic fill-up you'll ever have

At one memorable point, my team was split up. I was up on the second floor, melee-swinging with a fuel can when Coach called for help from the ground floor, where he lay incapacitated. But making sure everybody stayed alive to the end wasn't the objective—gassing up the car was, and there were three more gas cans near me. I compromised: I chucked the fuel I had in-hand as close to Coach as I could, then yelled at him to ignite the can by shooting it with his pistol. Sacrificing one of our cans created a fire that would hold off the infected crowded around Coach long enough for me to grab another can and get downstairs to save him. *L4D*'s mid-level crescendo events and chapter-capping finales are straightforward by comparison.

There are a few sadly missed opportunities for creative design alongside these brilliant moments: other than a stand-out crescendo event on a rollercoaster track and a tame target-shooting minigame, the "Dark Carnival" campaign only sparsely displays the circus theme I expected, and "Swamp Fever" reverts back to the familiar finale template of "defend this area with a machine gun turret while we wait for a rescue vehicle."

COMPARING THE COMPLETE L4D COLLECTION

THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF ALL NINE L4D CAMPAIGNS



In *L4D*, pipe bombs evaporated zombies into bloody mist. *L4D2's* turn them into dismembered undead acrobats working without a net.

Smokers drag our good name through the muck.

This just isn't a good day for Ellis.

This game teaches players the real-world consequences of shooting someone's ass off: namely, you then invariably see what's inside their ass.

BECOME THE SCAVENGER HUNTED

The gas-gathering gameplay from the "Dead Center" finale is so tense and so satisfying that *L4D2* makes an entirely new competitive multiplayer game mode out of it, and it's my single favorite addition to the game. In Scavenge mode, two teams of four compete in short alternating rounds to retrieve gas cans scattered around the map and pour them into a generator in the center to score points and add time, while the other team plays as Infected trying to stop them. Giving the Survivors an objective that *supersedes* survival (ironic, isn't it?) changes up the gameplay and mass-produces thrilling moments.

Scavenge's greatest strength is that it puts the Survivor team into difficult situations—whether to pour a gas can into the generator to score more points, or save a teammate from a Smoker in the hopes that you'll be able to get more gas with their help—that demand split-second response.

For the Infected team, victory isn't necessarily about killing Survivors, but rather delaying them and denying them gas cans until time runs out. The Infected can pull evil tricks to prevent Survivors from scoring—for example, the Spitter's acid goo can ignite any gas canisters that have been dropped by survivors, so if the human team fails to protect can carriers or piles gas cans close together, a well-placed acid loogie will set them back to square one.

ZOMBO COMBOS

OUR FAVORITE SPECIAL INFECTED TEAM-UP TACTICS PUT SURVIVORS IN NO-WIN SITUATIONS.

THE CHEMICAL BATH Pounce a Survivor with the Hunter while the Spitter coats the ground they're lying in with acid. The victim takes extra damage, and any rescuers will take damage freeing their teammate.

THE SOPHIE'S CHOICE Wait until survivors reach a long, narrow section (e.g. an escalator or rollercoaster track), and ram one away from the group with the Charger. At the same time, use the Smoker to pull another the opposite direction. Their friends have to decide who to save first.

THE FAT SHADOW Jockey a straggling Survivor and shadow the victim's movement with the Boomer. The Boomer's girth obscures line-of-sight on the victim, and their teammates won't have a clear shot. Popping the Boomer (and spraying their friend with bile) is their only option.

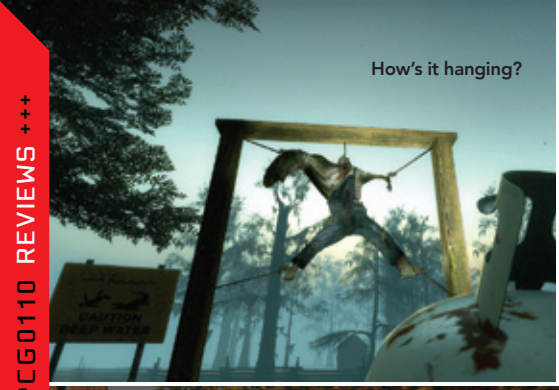
ANTI-ZOMBIE DEVICES

I can't understate how much Scavenge will extend the life of *L4D2*, but weapon-wise, there's nothing that gives players a genuinely new tactical option. There are no game-changers like remote mines or defensive items like body armor. The grenade launcher is the most novel—having a slow-reloading, powerful tube of ranged splash damage it an amazing tool for digging teammates out of a horde pile. New consumable items—small supplies of explosive and incendiary ammunition that let you kill tough zombies like Tanks a little more quickly and an adrenaline shot that speeds you up a little—are in a similar boat: they don't fundamentally alter gameplay, but serve as fun condiments to what's already there. Speaking of condiments: the new throwable item, Boomer bile, is a cousin to the pipe bomb that can be used to lure hordes away from your group, so it doesn't introduce many new tactics (except in Versus mode, where it can be used to blind a player-controlled infected).

More significantly, a defibrillator can now be carried in place of a health kit to revive dead teammates. We rarely used it, because we're so awesome (and we played mostly on normal difficulty) but when a teammate does flatline it beats the heck out of fighting your way to a respawn closet short-handed.

THE GUN STORE

THE GUN SHOP IN THE "DEAD CENTER" CAMPAIGN GIVES YOU A CHANCE TO STOCK UP ON L4D2'S NEW ARSENAL



Measured purely in "watercooler moments," *Left 4 Dead 2* is off the scale

Jockies are durable little jerks—removing one can take a couple of shotgun blasts.

I don't care *what* Gordon Freeman says—taking on a Tank with a crowbar is a bad idea.

She was infected after leaving the dentist's office.

BIG SHOES TO FILL

Oddly, the new survivor cast didn't recreate the charm and sense of familiarity we've felt for Louis, Francis, Zoey and Bill. They've got character, but there's no stand-out running "I hate..." Francis gag or Zoeyisms to break the tension—I started to miss Bill's allusions to 'Nam or other events to give us a sense of these characters' histories. Not that story was a big focus in *L4D*, and *L4D2* follows in that model by only alluding to the plot.

Left 4 Dead 2 will definitely inspire a sense of déjà vu in fans of the first game, but it's déjà vu *extreme*. This sequel makes interesting refinements, provides a bigger helping of painstakingly designed content, adds viciously annoying zombies and new satisfyingly gory ways to take their heads off. It refreshes and enhances, but does not reinvent the *Left 4 Dead* experience. The appeal of the kill-advance-kill mechanics will likely once again erode over time—this is still the bread and butter of how the zombie-apocalypse world functions—but measured purely in "watercooler moments," *Left 4 Dead 2* is off the scale. Scoring a last-second gas-pour in Scavenge to win the match in an upset was one of my most exciting multiplayer moments of the year, and there's a lot more where that came from. EVAN LAHTI

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A co-op first-person shooter set in the zombie apocalypse **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, 512MB GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 4-player co-op, 8-player versus **PUBLISHER** Valve **DEVELOPER** Valve **LINK** l4d.com **INFLUENCED BY** *Left 4 Dead, Louisiana, Soldier of Fortune* **ALTERNATIVELY** *Killing Floor* (77%) **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** M

SURVIVING THIS REVIEW

Evan Lahti as Nick, the riverboat gambler

Dan Stapleton as Ellis, the blue-collar mechanic

Norman Chan (Online Editor, Maximum PC) as Coach, the coach

Will Smith (Editor-in-Chief, Maximum PC) as Rochelle, the girl reporter

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Gorier, co-opier, chainsawier, wider and more infectious. A refreshed stack of content for the best zombie game that owes much to Scavenge, one of the best multiplayer modes you'll ever play in a shooter.

0% BETTER >> 100% **92%**

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

League of Legends

Colorful champions and easier learning curve put this freebie in a league of its own

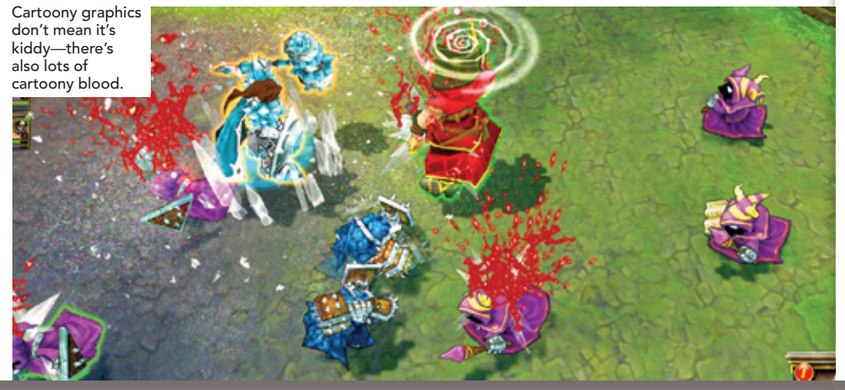
A PIRATE THAT CRAMS down oranges to remove his scurvy debuff, a pink-haired little girl whose stuffed teddy comes to life as a giant flaming bear, a depressed mummy who entangles his foes in his tear-stained linens and dozens more—this is not your average cast of characters. *League of Legends* has something that's missing from all too many games nowadays: personality.

It has also succeeded where others have failed: making the MOBA (multiplayer online battle arena) genre accessible. The fully voiced in-game tutorial sufficiently explains basic mechanics and objectives, and impressive interface refinements and a rock-solid multiplayer server infrastructure make *LoL* a game that anyone can jump into—for free—and have a grand old time. And maybe develop a new addiction.

The core gameplay, which builds on the popular *Warcraft III* mod *Defense of The Ancients,* will be mostly familiar to *DoTA* and *Demigod* fans. Two teams struggle for dominance on an RTS-style map populated by AI-controlled minions battling it out; each player controls a single hero that levels up and gains new abilities from experience in combat and attempt to turn the tide of battle in their team's favor. But *LoL* makes some excellent new additions: Shrubs break line-of-sight on enemies and provide ambush spots that add new levels of strategy, and maps are designed with many avenues for lane-hopping (moving between the highways along which the minions advance) to keep action fast and unpredictable. These neutral zones are populated by creatures that are content to stay out of the fight until you get too close, and offer XP and item rewards if you take time out to fight them.

Champions are represented on the super-useful minimap by small portrait icons, and when you give a move order the map shows the path your character will take, allowing you to alter your command if you don't like the path the AI chose—the next best thing to having it read our minds.

The lack of base or minion upgrades is disappointing, but the game is already dangerously close to being too complex for players new to the genre, so I can understand why it was omitted. However, the inability to tweak match settings beyond choosing one of just three maps is not as easily forgivable.



Cartoony graphics don't mean it's kiddy—there's also lots of cartoony blood.

Life lessons learned from *LoL*: if you find yourself standing on or near a giant X, move quickly.

Silence is golden, especially when you use it to prevent Jax from using his powerful Leap Strike attack.

You'll need your whole team working together to bring down The Baron, the baddest NPC on the map.

FAMILIAR FACES

League of Legends' massive roster of champions borrows from some of the greatest icons of gaming geek history.

SHACO the Demon Jester
Dresses like a clown and lays jack-in-the-box traps, mixing humor with murder.

REMINDS US OF...

THE JOKER
Batman

ANNIE the Dark Child
Small school-aged girl with a mysterious past and tremendous destructive power.

REMINDS US OF...

ALMA
F.E.A.R.

KASSADIN the Void Walker
Has a breathing system built into his suit, wields an energy blade and silences foes (presumably by Force choke).

REMINDS US OF...

DARTH VADER
Star Wars

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Community is key in a game that doesn't offer any real single-player options (weak AI bots don't count), and *DoTA* in particular has a reputation for a player base that's not very noob-friendly, to say the least. Riot Games has done a lot of little things to ensure that it fosters a welcoming community eager to help new players, such as contests for veterans to give advice to new players, links to forum tutorials and Q&As on the start screen, and XP bonuses for not dropping out of matches early.

Your persistent profile provides several upgrade systems that add long-term depth to the game. You can, for example, unlock spells like heal or teleport to use during your next match, providing significant change and progression as you level up. This is the deep level of customization that MMO fans crave: the freedom for players to tweak and maximize the effectiveness of their favorite champion or champions—as well as persistent rewards that encourage you to keep playing.

At the end of each match, players are put in a chatroom and given enough statistics to make an accountant blush (including bragging-rights stats like "highest critical hit" and tweakable graphs). This data is extremely useful for new players looking to learn from mistakes and adapt strategies and tactics for the next round.

League of Legends is also one of those rare games that invades my consciousness, forcing me to dwell on last night's match when I should be focused on this morning's deadlines. It's that addictive property that Riot is counting on. *LoL* is free to download, but cosmetic or convenience upgrades, such as unique hero skins or boosts to increase the rate at which you unlock new skills, rune slots and heroes, are up for sale in the store. It's by no means essential to compete, but I'll likely be buying a few items just to support this excellent game. **JOSH AUGUSTINE**

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A colorful MOBA that combines action RPG, RTS, and tower defense gameplay with persistent elements. **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** Free **PLAY IT ON** P4 3GHz, 2GB RAM, 512MB GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 3850, broadband internet **MULTIPLAYER** 10 players **PUBLISHER** THQ **DEVELOPER** Riot Games **LINK** leagueoflegends.com **INFLUENCED BY** *Defense of the Ancients (Warcraft III* mod) **ALTERNATIVELY** *Demigod* (81%) **COPY PROTECTION** None **ESRB** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

League of Legends is the most accessible, rewarding and endearing of *DotA*'s offspring yet.

86%

0% BETTER >> 100%

++ GOOD ++

Painkiller: Resurrection

Reanimated for a lifeless round two

"Sorry, no shirt, no soul, no salvation."

Hey, didn't I flush you down the toilet once?

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A straight-up demon blasting FPS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $30 **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, 256MB GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 16 players **PUBLISHER** JoWooD **DEVELOPER** Homegrown Games **LINK** painkillerresurrection.com **INFLUENCED BY** *Serious Sam* **ALTERNATIVELY** *Painkiller (84%)* **COPY PROTECTION** None **ESRB** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Makes a one-man war against the armies of hell quite depressingly dull. Pass me a fistful of acetaminophen, quickly.

0% BETTER >> 100% **56%**

++ MEDIOCRE ++

ACCORDING TO THE OFFICIAL website, *Painkiller: Resurrection* had "a Catholic priest advising" it and offers "painstakingly researched details" of its purgatorial setting. You have absolutely no idea how much I want to see those notes. The official word on whether Satan could have his ass handed to him with a shotgun? That's edutainment!

Sadly, I can't comment on the veracity of *Painkiller*'s hellish abysses of damned souls without murdering a few puppies, downing a whole pack of ibuprofen and probably renouncing my atheism. Still, I can't argue about the action side: as a shooter, *Resurrection* is definitely a trip through purgatory. But not in a good way.

At heart, it's exactly the same as the original *Painkiller*, with an upgraded engine and some new *Max Payne* (no relation)-style graphic novel bits scattered around the place. You're in the afterlife, you've got a gun, and there are hundreds of demons between you and the end of the level. It's completely brainless shooting, from start to finish.

Unfortunately, what fun there is in pinning enemies to the wall with a stake gun—and I think we can agree, that's quite a lot—is let down by a monstrously dull campaign that manages the unusual trick of simultaneously being much too short, at just six levels, and yet still making almost all of them longer than a sentence for nun genocide. When you're constantly under siege, there's a limit to how long you want to be stuck in one place, especially in areas this bland. There are flashes of inspiration, such as the giant pirates wielding dual cannons under their arms, but the majority is murky, unending "meh," punctuated by tiresome rounds of "Where the hell am I meant to go now?"

IRRITATING BADDIES

Even playing normally, the enemies are more annoying than exciting, particularly when the game wheels out the fast-moving explode-o-dogs or blips a small army into existence when what you really need is a health boost. Only a few weapons are genuinely fun to use, and even then, the appeal wanes when the more annoying baddies show up.

Multiplayer may prove a saving grace, although it's unlikely that *Resurrection* will put *Painkiller* back into the spotlight it enjoyed a few years back. There are plenty of online maps, thankfully smaller than the main campaign's, which should keep existing fans happy for a while. Online or not though, only the most hardcore need apply for this second chance at trigger-happy redemption. **RICHARD COBBETT**

Minions of Hell never lose their enthusiasm for being shot at.

Machinarium is scrapyard and playground in equal measure.

3 FREE MP3s from the *Machinarium* soundtrack, on the disc!

Machinarium

A lovely adventure that tests your metal

GIVE A FIVE YEAR-OLD a metal ladle, and may God have mercy on your soul. He'll whack the table legs, turn the radiator into a musical instrument, send the cat diving underneath the couch and do everything in the world you could possibly do with such a device *except* ladle soup.

A hint book is a mini-game away.

That's the joyful, whimsical spirit of *Machinarium*, and either you'll love exploring and interacting with its utterly singular world, or the disciplinarian in you will rise up to declare That's Not What That's For.

Machinarium was developed by a team led by Jakub Dvorský, the man behind the surreal Flash-based games *Samorost* and *Samorost 2*. Like those games, *Machinarium* drops you, with barely any introduction, into a bizarre junkyard world that's gorgeously illustrated and swathed in a lovely, evocative soundtrack. But instead of handing you a metal ladle, you get a nameless little robot with a cute face and a stretchable torso.

As a classic point-and-click adventure, the beauty of *Machinarium* is that it turns otherwise laborious pixel-hunting into a pleasure. Touch things and they respond with the game's brilliant vocabulary of squeaks, clatters, gurgles and murmurs; grabbing objects, squeezing them, combining them and even electrocuting them all pay off in terrific noises and often a bit of feedback on whether you're getting hot or cold. These sounds are why, unlike most adventure games, the puzzles in *Machinarium* that are the most fun are the ones that are the *least* logical, such as turning algae into an extremely valuable asset for a desperate prisoner. Even doing nothing while you think about a puzzle has its own reward, as the story takes shape in little thought bubbles that pop up over our hero's little tin head as he recalls being bullied and having his sweetheart taken away by the same mechanical brutes who are now oppressing an entire city.

Machinarium does whittle away considerably at its own charm with hotspots that, for instance, don't show up until you're not only near them, but at the correct height. You can bypass tough puzzles by playing a tedious mini-game that opens up a hint book, but that won't save you from an insanely laborious and unimaginative penultimate puzzle. But those stumbles, however serious, are far fewer and bookended by those other moments when the beautiful sounds, images, and puzzles align perfectly and forge those unforgettable moments of the very best adventures. **LOGAN DECKER**

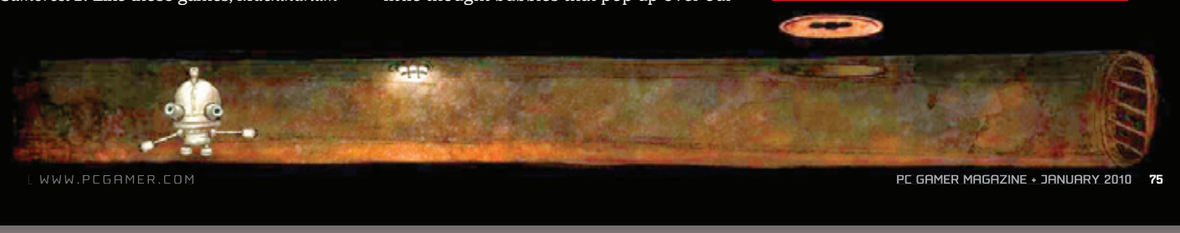
VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A Flash-based point-and-click adventure game **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $20 **PLAY IT ON** P4 2.6GHz; GeForce 6500/Radeon HD 3400 **MULTIPLAYER** None **PUBLISHER** Amanita Design **DEVELOPER** Amanita Design **LINK** machinarium.com **INFLUENCED BY** *Samarost*, *Samarost 2* **ALTERNATIVELY** *Bad Mojo (84%)*, room-escape games **COPY PROTECTION** None **ESRB** Not Rated

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

A delightful adventure with clever puzzles, a great atmospheric soundtrack and superbly stylized art.

0% BETTER >> 100% **79%**

++ GOOD ++



That big dude? He hits things.

Torchlight

Dusty old isometric crypt-looting gleams in the retro dungeon crawling of Torchlight

THREE PLAYABLE CHARACTERS: a brute, an archer and a mage. A town atop an endless dungeon that's randomly stitched together as you play. Hundreds of enemies that die in a torrent of clicks. Scrolls, health and magic potions, quests, leveling, loot...and more loot.

Diablo is the obvious comparison you could draw with this combat-heavy RPG, but *Torchlight* is more than a clone—this is like a super-clone with psychic powers. Choose a character. Choose a companion cat or a dog. Enjoy a quaint cutscene, and then wonder where your evening went. The enemies come thick and fast: rat-men, zombies, tree monsters, lizards, spiders, phantoms. Watch as the loot flies. You'll ditch your starter wand and start duel-wielding handguns—no wait, a flaming wand and an icy maul. Or a crossbow that electrocutes people and leeches health. The game cobbles together item stats and effects on the fly, so you can pick up far worse and far better than that.

If you get too much loot, you can send your pet to the surface to sell some. He's a handy little companion to bring dungeon crawling: he can wear trinkets, learn spells, and be switched between aggressive, defensive and passive modes. You can also catch mutated fish and feed them to your pet to turn it into a more powerful spider or goblin for two minutes.

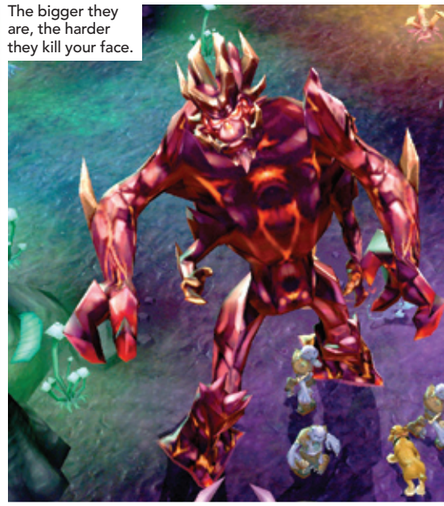
Torchlight starts out easy. Within minutes you're swimming in restorative potions and helpful scrolls. The difficulty ramps up comfortably after about four hours, and you'll finish the main quest in about 20. The quests are casual, the fun never stops, and the loot keeps coming.

Also, it's gorgeous. Bold colors, charismatic design, good voice actors, and a mellow Lord-of-the-Strings-with-acoustic-guitar soundtrack bring it to life.

My knight in shining armor ...and his shining pistol.

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A colorful action-RPG adventure in the bowels of the Earth **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $20 **PLAY IT ON** P4 3GHz, 1GB RAM, GeForce 6600GT/Radeon X1600 **MULTIPLAYER** No **PUBLISHER** Perfect World **DEVELOPER** Runic **LINK** torchlightgame.com **INFLUENCED BY** *Diablo, Fate* **ALTERNATIVELY** *Titan Quest Gold* (80%) **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** Not rated

Aw, don't kill them! They eat flies!



The bigger they are, the harder they kill your face.

Enemies have a great variety of appearances and abilities.

> Too much loot? You can send your pet to the surface to sell it.

It's not silly, but it's fun. It's not adult, but it's mature. It's simple. It's bloody addictive.

But it lacks confidence. *Diablo* used an isometric camera because it only had the resources to show the world from one angle. *Torchlight* renders the entire world in every direction, but the camera clings stubbornly to the same viewpoint. Why? Romanticizing over the good old isometric days doesn't seem to gel with the fresh approach that *Torchlight* offers.

There's no doubt this plays better, looks better, and is entirely better crafted than some thoughtless *Diablo* carbon-copy. Take the item lottery, where you pay for loot without knowing what enchantments it might have. You can find magical gems to insert into your items, and then people to smash the weapons so you can get them out again. You can retire your old characters to enable perks for new ones. You can share loot between characters. Many quests and secret items open up isolated one-shot dungeons for quick sessions. There's a lot to love.

TORCHLIGHT IS LIKE A QUILT. It's functional, it's pretty and it's got personality and sentiment. It's made with extreme care from bits and pieces of old things—you can see the seams. *Torchlight* does more than just hang flesh on the bones of *Diablo*, but it *is* still a clone. It's easily worth the price, but it could have been a revolution rather than an accomplished resurrection. **JAZ McDOUGALL**

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

An addictive, attractive, thoughtfully made dungeon crawler. But it could have taken some risks.

0% BETTER >> 100% **89%**

++ GOOD ++

The bottomless dungeon: some assembly required

Star Wars
The Force Unleashed: Ultimate Sith Edition

The Force is strong with this one, but the fighting is not

THE FIRST THING YOU DO in *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed* is to pick up a Wookiee and hurl him off of a cliff. A short time later you'll fire lightning from your fingertips, making you feel completely unstoppable. Moments later, you realize why it's not called "Lightsaber Unleashed."

You'll look cool using it, but saber attack combos usually take a few seconds to execute, during which time you're completely locked into that animation and cannot block or avoid an incoming attack. Also, enemies continue to shoot you when you've been knocked down—and there's nothing less fun in a fighting game than being unable to defend yourself. They're annoyances that make *TFU* far less satisfying as a melee fighter.

Meanwhile, the main storyline does a respectable job of wedging its psychotically bipolar hero into the mythology between episodes III and IV—underdeveloped romantic subplot aside—and the included expansions have a bit of fun with "What if?" scenarios.

I strongly recommend the gamepad to avoid some maddeningly frustrating experiences where the controls don't quite translate to mouse and keyboard. Don't even think about remapping the keys to mouse buttons: the game fails to update the frequent and tiresome quicktime event cues, so pushing the button flashed on the screen won't work. Regardless of which control method you choose, be ready for frequent loading screens—even between menus for some reason.

Bonus: there's a huge range of costume options to play with.

It flies in the face of everything Yoda taught us, but *TFU* proves that mastery of the Force isn't everything. **DAN STAPLETON**

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTX/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** None **PUBLISHER** Aspyr **DEVELOPER** LucasArts/Aspyr **LINK** Aspyr.com/product/info/117 **COPY PROTECTION** Disc check **ESRB** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT
0% BETTER >> 100% 60%
++ MEDIOCRE ++

Star Wars
The Clone Wars: Republic Heroes

To win, push the attack button repeatedly.

For heroes, they jump off cliffs a lot

HERE'S A PRIME EXAMPLE of why games based on TV shows have such an abysmal reputation. Although it manages to capture the essence of the animated *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* show, *Republic Heroes* is awful enough that not even a die-hard fan should buy it for himself or his kids.

One of the first things that'll strike you: even running at full settings at 1920x1200 resolution, this game looks like it was made for the PlayStation 2. The second thing: the palm of your hand hitting your face after suffering through the gameplay.

Levels alternate between playing as lightsaber-swinging, platform-jumping Jedi and blaster-rifle-wielding Republic clone troopers. It takes only moments to discover just how terrible the platforming is. Even the Force can't help you—it's supposed to guide you onto platforms, but this works only if you begin in the correct spot, otherwise you'll fall to your doom. Which you will. Often. Meanwhile, combat in both sections is bland and repetitive—you'll be killing the same enemies throughout the game, with the occasional generic boss sprinkled in.

But even under all the darkness, I can still sense traces of good in this game. Points can be redeemed for unlockable big heads, hats and masks, and while these don't enhance the gameplay in any way, they do add a small bit of unexpected fun. **ERIK BELSAAS**

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $30 **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 3850 **MULTIPLAYER** 2-player co-op **PUBLISHER** LucasArts **DEVELOPER** Krome Studios **LINK** lucasarts.com/games/jointheclonewars **COPY PROTECTION** Disc check **ESRB** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT
0% BETTER >> 100% 43%
++ WEAK ++

Flight is great, but keep an eye on that timer or you'll pull an Icarus-style faceplant.

Aion

I stared into the Abyss...and the Abyss ganked me

BEAUTIFUL YET COWARDLY, *Aion* can't quite summon the courage to fully embrace its own player-versus-player-centric nature. It banishes low-level players to the least-interesting parts of its world—attractive but unambitiously designed zones where you'll run the same repetitive quests and player-versus-environment combat you've been doing since *EverQuest*—all the while dangling the carrot of compelling PvP combat in front of you. Effectively, this builds a 25-level-high barrier to entry to the real game, a daunting 30-plus-hour grind session between every new player and the interesting, challenging parts that make *Aion* worthy of his time.

This grind is *Aion*'s biggest negative—and it goes on for what seems like an eon. It's full of quests, but too many are the standard "kill X number of Y enemies." They felt instantly old and stale to me. Although power-players hit the level 50 cap in one month, it takes real dedication to work past the bog. In a game with such a strong PvP-focus, why make us wait so long to reach it?

What will make or break this game is what happens at levels 25 through 50, when you gain access to the Abyss. This is the heart of *Aion*, the place where PvP is centered and where the best PvE rewards are to be had. It can also be frustrating, because newcomers to the zone have little chance against higher-level gankers due to level-based combat modifiers. Still, the PvP battles over forts and castles can be spirited, and the game throws in a wild card: the AI-controlled third race, the Balaur. They appear in their skyships above forts and attack, taking over and holding territory to serve as a balancing (or perhaps unbalancing) mechanism.

What makes *Aion*'s PvP stand out is its implementation of open-world battle, as opposed to *WoW*'s closed-off battlegrounds. It's not necessarily "better" than other games' PvP, but it's organized in a way that thus far has produced a good amount of action, and benefits from the added tension that comes from having to look over your shoulder for enemy players at all times.

You play as one of two visually different but statistically identical races: the pretty Elyos or the darker-yet-nearly-as-pretty Asmodians. Both have full access to the eight character classes including the expected triumvirate of healers, tanks and damage-dealer archetypes.

Moment-to-moment gameplay is the standard model you've come to love or loathe in games like *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft*: level-based and quest-driven, with repetitive, but not entirely mindless button-mashing. Some skills chain off of others, and you can also get some offensive or defensive bonuses by moving your character during combat, so you need to pay attention to be aware of those opportunities during fights to maximize your combat potential.

Because it doesn't make many bold moves to differentiate its typical gameplay from other MMOs, *Aion* concentrates on being a polished experience. The game world isn't geographically big by modern standards, but it does feel like a fully realized world. Art direction leans toward an Asian RPG visual style, and the game engine renders some beautiful scenery and characters. Controls have a good feel—the interface is well-designed and intuitive, and your avatar's response to keystrokes and mouse clicks is tight.

FIGHT AND/OR FLIGHT

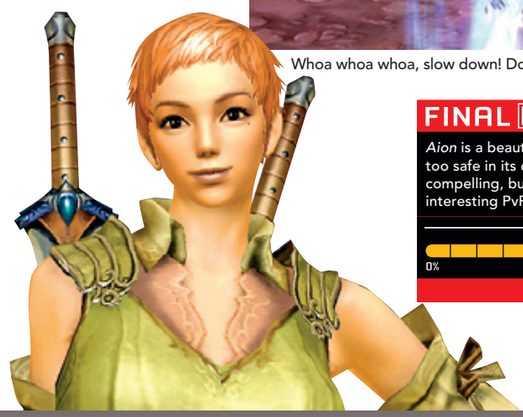
One new wrinkle is flying. At level 10 players get a set of wings they can use for brief periods of flight, but you must be cautious using it—if your flight time expires while airborne, you could plunge to your death. Thus, most fighting takes place on the ground, with flight used mostly to get in a first-strike before the enemy knows you're there.

With any game that relies heavily on the community for its endgame content, PvP remains a big question mark. Just as it took several months for the problems with *Warhammer Online*'s endgame (like lopsided PvP battles) to become evident, there's no way of knowing what it will be like a couple of months from now when there's a healthy number of players at the level cap. Will the level 50s dominate the Abyss, forcing any newcomers to grind to level 40 or higher before they can enjoy the PvP, turning *Aion* into that much more of a treadmill? Impossible to predict, but what *Aion* is right now is a well-honed, if familiar MMO experience that features satisfying, if delayed PvP. MARK ASHER

Get ready for 24 levels of PvE whack-a-mole.

Whoa whoa whoa, slow down! Don't pull that move on the first date.

You can get a good look at *Aion*'s beautiful scenery and wildlife from the air.



FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Aion is a beautiful-looking game that plays it a bit too safe in its design decisions to be ultimately compelling, but rewards long-term play with interesting PvP combat.

0% BETTER >> 100% **70%**

++ FAIR ++

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A PvP-centric MMO **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $50 + $15/month **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, 512MB GeForce 7800GTX/Radeon HD2900, broadband internet **MULTIPLAYER** Massively **PUBLISHER** NCSoft **DEVELOPER** NCSoft **LINK** na.aiononline.com **INFLUENCED BY** *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft* **ALTERNATIVELY** *Warhammer Online* (86%) **COPY PROTECTION** Subscription **ESRB** T

Excavating different sites reveals all sorts of treasure.

The Sims 3 World Adventures

Around the world in 80 outfits

SO FAR THE BIGGEST worries in your Sims' lives have been burglars in the night and whether or not they can justify buying a telescope. Now, in the *Sims 3: World Adventures* expansion, they have to deal with fiery traps, mummies and sinister corporations—and still pay the bills on time.

For the price of a plane ticket, your Sim can now visit China, Egypt or France for shopping, eating and desecrating the resting places of the dead. Some tasks involve chatting with locals or perfecting the martial art of Sim Fu by sparring and meditating, but the best ones are all about raiding the local tombs.

It's the most game-like that *The Sims* has ever been. You'll need to solve puzzles, disarm traps and make sure your inventory is well-stocked before you start an adventure. True, the puzzles are basic, such as pushing statues on to pressure pads or soaking your Sim with water before ordering them to jump through walls of fire, but there's a genuine sense of discovery within the levels.

As always with the willful wanderers, time management is everything. You can take a tent and some snacks with you, but if you get into a tomb and suddenly hear nature calling, it's a long walk back to the facilities. Add to all this the collectibles, the special adventuring equipment and all the usual skill leveling-up, and suddenly you're playing a beginner's role-playing game within the sandbox of *The Sims 3*.

The length of your trip abroad is dictated by your visa status—it sounds complicated, but hunting down flame fruit or talking to the surly locals is still easier than dealing with a dour-faced trout behind a passport desk. As you earn points from missions, you can buy special items and potions, and eventually you can purchase a swanky holiday home where your Sim can grow old like a tax exile.

There's a horribly realistic catch to all this fun, though: travel is damn expensive, more than 1,000 Simoleons per trip. Even if you keep your Sim living in a one-room slum with little more than a toilet and an old sofa for company, you'll still need a decent job to save up enough cash. You'll spend time with the new content, but it's also a long and at times frustrating wait between your various journeys.

This pack also has a more worrying characteristic, which is that it seems more prone to bugs than previous Sims games have been. There's lots of texture pop-in, and occasionally some hitches in quests. But those are only a few annoying moments in hours and hours of exploring, flirting with snake charmers and feeling a bit like an incontinent Indiana Jones.

On top of the missions, there are an embarrassing number of relics to collect, photographs to take and new cosmopolitan adornments for your home and Sim. There's no doubt that it's worth a few real world Simoleons. (*WA* is twice the price of a previous *Sims* expansions, but that includes $10 credit at the online store.) Just make sure you and your beloved Sim family is prepared to pay in sweat, cash and time. **RACHEL PENNY**

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** An expansion that enables you to send your Sims around the world **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo 2.4GHz, 3GB RAM, GeForce 7800GTX/Radeon HD2600 XT, *The Sims 3* **MULTIPLAYER** None **PUBLISHER** Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER** The Sims Studio **LINK** bit.ly/1jPEcZ **INFLUENCED BY** *The Secret of Monkey Island, World of Warcraft* **ALTERNATIVELY** *The Sleeping Dragon* (72%) **COPY PROTECTION** Disc check **ESRB** T

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

An essential expansion pack, though be prepared to play hard and work even harder. But think of that villa in the sun...

0% BETTER >> 100% **76%**

++ GOOD ++

Fear of monsters: not a psychosis.

Dreamkiller

Wake me when it's over

AS DREAM-WALKING, tough-talking psychologist Alice Drake, you must enter your patients' nightmares to fight their fears. With a minigun. The world's only first-person Freud-'em-up.

The 12 dream-levels are a series of lush set-pieces connected by short corridors, and the diverse gallery of baddies are often functionally identical—either a little dude, a slow dude with rockets, or an enormo-dude. The six weapons are fun, Easy mode is a smooth, modest challenge, and the voice work is believable. It just doesn't try hard enough. It doesn't offer dark, thoughtful dissections of the human mind, or showcase a consistent mythology.

Ah, castration anxiety—that's more like it.

Instead, you shoot crowds of freaks. Every patient is reduced to a couple of hastily Googled phobias, and curing them boils down to shooting monsters. Agoraphobia? Shooting monsters. Fear of becoming a workaholic? Shooting monsters. To complain that it's ignorant of psychology would be moot; it's just plain ignorant. Enemies do nothing but run at you. The rooms are nothing but arenas.

The multiplayer includes a co-op mode that sounds cool, but you'll find just as many servers on the moon.

Frustratingly, *Dreamkiller* offers the odd glimpse of potential: after scaling a vertigo-sufferer's dream-tower, you must cross a high, narrow bridge. Predictably, it starts to collapse. In that entire level, despite all the altitude, it's the only sequence that attempts to use the patient's vertigo for suspense.

Psychonauts did brain-delving better. *Serious Sam* did campy horde-killing better. For this price, you could buy both. Twice.

JAZ McDOUGALL

VITALS **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $30 **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850 **MULTIPLAYER** 8 players **PUBLISHER** Aspyr **DEVELOPER** Mindware **LINK** dreamkillergame.com **COPY PROTECTION** Steam **ESRB** M

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **51%**

++ MEDIOCRE ++

Cities XL

Flakey neighbors make online city building a risky proposition

"DAMN! I'M IN MY SECOND RECESSION," a bitter mayor grumbles into the uncaring chat window of planet Caliban. Yeah, we've all got problems pal. That happens when you're in charge of an entire city.

Cities XL is the obvious next step for city planning games: a massively multiplayer sim in which you can connect cities and trade with other players—a world of zoning fantasy. You lay down infrastructure—roads, civic services, bridges—then zone off areas to become housing, retail centers, office plazas, industrial estates, farms and so on.

Your city needs roads. Lots and lots of 'em.

But rigidity is a recurring theme in *Cities XL*. For example, everything must be bounded by roads. Housing estate? You'll want a road around that. Park area? Road. Farm? Road. The placement logic is a headache, one where intersections and wasted space can become a real issue—unless you adhere to a soulless grid system to avoid the hassle. Which you inevitably will, as a walk around other players' cities will readily attest.

Must be something good on TV tonight.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

How Cities XL connects city planners

A MESSENGER This little dock provides you with all the contact info (e.g. emails) and lets you know how many friends are online.

B BUDDIES Your contacts list, where you can manage all your favorite *Cities XL* buddies. It's good to make friends for trading.

C LOOT *Cities XL* randomly drops loot into your profile—blueprints that you can develop into megastructures, such as the Eiffel Tower.

D TRACK IT You and your friends' in-game actions appear here, so you can follow events even when you're not playing.

E CITY BITY You can keep track of your city's stats, such as the population and the ongoing costs, in this bar at the bottom.

Cities can become exporters of power, food or even workers

BLEEDING THE SYSTEM

While the macro goal of this city-builder is firmly based in the logic of supply and demand through multiplayer trade, the single-player bulk of the game—the actual city building—shows some bizarre interpretations of market forces. Your citizens will demand entertainment, but rather than using your carefully placed retail zones and handcrafted leisure centers, they'll testily ignore them and force you to place subsidized bowling alleys and sporting arenas at the taxpayers' expense. Picky picky.

With its planet-wide trade system, *Cities XL* dangles the carrot of a player-driven market. Cities can specialize to become exporters of power, food or even workers. To trade online, your city needs to be balanced enough to be stable, then over-productive, which in turn unbalances things and requires your attention. At this point, you run to the trade window and plug the gap with goods from players afar. However, the exchange system is buggy, hard to assimilate and missing simple features. And they can't seriously expect us to risk our fortunes on other players. Is there any guarantee of people sticking around and paying $9.25 a month to trade and walk around different cities?

URBAN EYESORES

Cities XL can be engrossing and rewarding, but doesn't quite pull off the intimacy it's clearly aiming for. All that walking around at street level with emotes is superfluous. You still *care* about your metropolises, but not the fake people in them.

The biggest tangible flaws are the graphical weak spots and some awkward construction tools, but the intangible things are more concerning. Will sufficient people subscribe for long enough to make embarking on global trade a worthwhile pursuit? And will they stick around while you finish your collaborative colossus?

As a city builder, *Cities XL* is satisfying. It's approachable but deep, and indulges your zoning fantasies. As a multiplayer experiment in free trade, I'm less convinced. It's as though Monte Cristo couldn't make trade fundamental or it would break the game, yet it *needs* to be central in order to work. What a pickle. JAMES CAREY

Is someone trying to reduce their carbon footprint?

VITALS **WHAT IS IT?** A city-builder with an MMO economy **RELEASE** Out now **EXPECT TO PAY** $40 + $9.25/month **PLAY IT ON** Core 2 Duo 2.4GHz, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800/Radeon 3850, broadband internet **MULTIPLAYER** Massively **PUBLISHER** Monte Cristo **DEVELOPER** Monte Cristo **LINK** citiesxl.com **INFLUENCED BY** *City Life*, *EVE Online*, *SimCity* **ALTERNATIVELY** *City Life* (83%) **COPY PROTECTION** Online activation/Subscription **ESRB** E

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

Enjoyable city planning but a timid a foray into MMO territory. Will enough people stick around to make trading work?

0% BETTER >> 100% **75%**

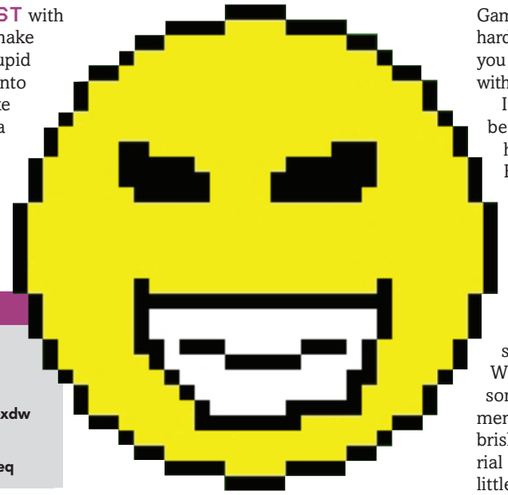
++ FAIR ++

How to create a game without writing code

WE MAKE ENEMIES IN GAME MAKER 7

OK, IT'S TIME TO BE HONEST with yourself. You've always wanted to make a game. Even a little one. Even a stupid one. We all have. Then you looked into the matter a bit and decided to make something a bit easier instead, like a ham sandwich.

Game Maker 7 is one of those ingenious little apps that enables you to build a game via a simple graphical interface, bypassing the need for tedious code-learning.



GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY: Medium
TIME: 1 hour
RESOURCES:

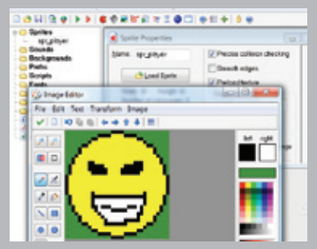
- Download Game Maker **snipurl.com/sbxdw**
- Game Maker Wiki **snipurl.com/sbxe0**
- Game Maker Tutorials **snipurl.com/sbxeq**

Games are about making rules, and that's a hard knack to teach, but this tutorial will walk you through building a simple platformer with a twist, to instruct and inspire you.

It works like this: Objects, which can be anything from enemies and bullets to health bars and platforms, consist of Events and the Actions they trigger. For example, in the Create Event of a bullet object, the first Action might "Set Horizontal Speed to 50"—in other words, start it moving very fast.

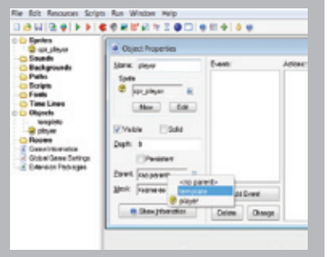
We'll be using the trial version of Game Maker. Download it at *snipurl.com/sbxdw*, install it, and start it up. Be sure to check File > Advanced Mode. When this tutorial asks you to create something, do so from the "Resources" menu. Try to learn quickly; this first part is brisk, as we've tried to cram as much tutorial in as possible, but we'll slow down in a little while. Hold on tight.

01 GO GO GO!



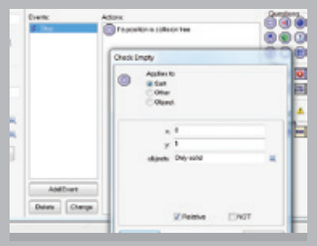
Create a new Sprite from the Resources menu, and call it "spr_player." Click "Edit Sprite" and double-click on image0 to bring up Game Maker's image editor. **Draw a ball with a face (hey, everyone can draw a ball with a face) then close and save everything.** We'll create some objects now, via Resources again. Call the first one "template" (leave its settings alone) and the second one "Player"—set "sprite" to "spr_player," and "parent object" to "template."

02 WHO'S YOUR DADDY?



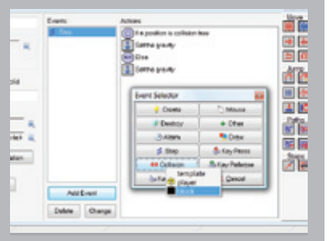
Right-click Player and select "Duplicate" then name this cloned object "Enemy." Because "template" is the parent of both Player and Enemy, they both inherit and extend its behavior. So let's give them something useful to inherit. **Open up Template, click Add Event > Step > Step. Look through the buttons on the right—there are seven tabs of them—and find "Check Empty"** (a blue hexagon with a dotted circle). Drag it into "Actions."

03 COMING DOWN



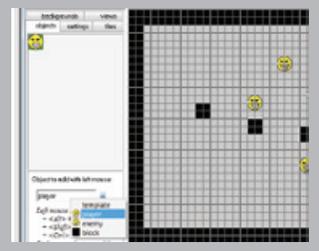
In Check Empty, enter x as 0 and y as 1, and check "Relative." Check Empty is a condition, the very root of a game's interactivity. It's asking if the spot one pixel below the object is empty. Note the "NOT" box, for asking if that spot is not empty. **Now, we'll add "Set Gravity," direction 270, gravity 1, then an "Else" condition and another Set Gravity—only this time the gravity should be set to zero.** In other words, "If there's a gap below us, pull us down to Earth. If not, don't."

04 WHAT HE SAID



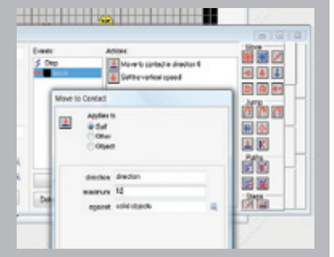
We've now set up basic behavior for what to do when there's no ground beneath your feet, which both Player and Enemy will inherit. Next up: scenery. **Make a new sprite, "spr_block," and fill it black. Uncheck "transparent" and "precise collision checking," and make a new object called "block."** Set spr_block as the sprite, and check "Solid." Back in "template," click Add Event > Collision > "block," and within that, "Set Vertical Speed" to zero. Phew!

05 BLOCK PARTY



Now make a new room. Halfway down the left panel, you'll see "Object to add with left mouse." **Select "block" from that menu, then use left click to add blocks into your level (hold Shift to paint many at once).** Seal off the edges of the level with a border of blocks, place a Player object and some Enemy objects in mid air, then hit F5 to run your game, such as it is. Don't be alarmed if they all fall down and land strangely. We'll fix that.

06 SAFETY FIRST

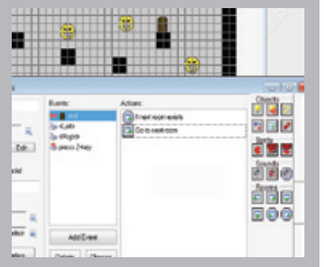


In Template again, above "Set the vertical speed," insert an action called "Move to Contact." Enter direction as "direction," and the maximum as "12." These settings help smooth collision. In "player," click Add Event > Keyboard > <Right>. Add another "Check Empty" action, with x as 4, y as 0, and check "relative" again. Find and add "Jump to position," and use those same coordinates. Then you want "Move here if it's already empty."

07 JUMP AROUND

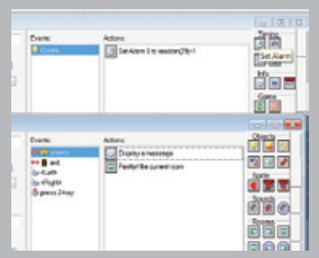
You can add a <Left> equivalent, if you like—set the x as -4 instead for both the Check Empty and the Jump to Position actions. Next, add a "Key Press" (not "Keyboard" this time, you notice) event for your jump button of choice—mine is <Z>—and for this Event, just "Set Vertical Speed" to -12. This gives your guy an upward boost. Run your game by hitting F5, but this time tap your jump key to hover, and use the arrow keys to move.

08 WIN CONDITIONS!



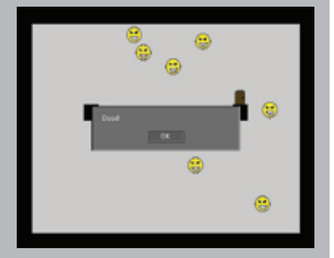
It wouldn't be a game unless you can win. In this game, you win a level by getting out of it. Just like *Portal*. **Make an object called "exit," draw a door sprite for it, and add a Collision "exit" event for your Player object.** In this event, find a "Check Next"action, add it, then a "Next Room" action. Add an "Else," and then a "Restart Game." In plain logic: "If there's a next room, load it up. If not, restart the game." Now you can place an exit in your rooms.

09 INSERT DANGER HERE



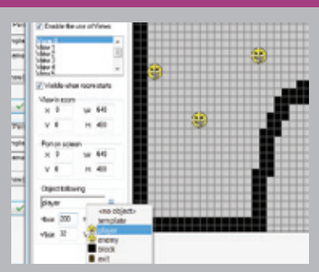
At this point, you've got a reward, but no risk. You go to the exit and you've won. Life should never be that easy. To fix this, in your Player object, add a Collision "enemy" event for the player, add "Display a message," enter the message as "Dead!," and add a Restart Room event after it. **Enemies are now fatal to touch.** In the Enemy object, add a "Create" event and look for a "Set Alarm" action. Add it, and set the alarm to "random(29)+1," leaving "alarm" as 0.

10 LET'S BOUNCE



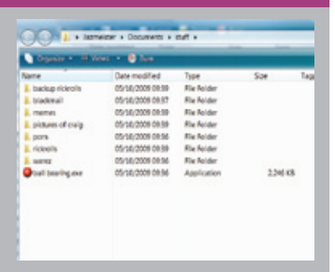
Add an "Alarm 0" event, and copy the "Set Alarm" from the create event exactly. We now have an alarm that goes off every 1-30 steps. The next stage is to define what happens when it does. Below "Set Alarm," add "Set Vertical Speed," this time to -12. Thanks to our erratic alarm, this enemy will now bounce up and down randomly, and remember: you're dead if it touches you. Try designing some more rooms now, with enemies and exits.

11 THE JOY OF SCROLLING



Open one of your rooms and take a look at the "settings" tab. Notice that you can alter the size of the room here. Try making it four times as long (width: 2560). Wouldn't it be nice if it scrolled automatically as you moved through it? Easy. In the "views" tab, check "Enable the use of Views," "Visible when room starts," and for "Object following," select Player. For "hbor," enter something like 200. The camera will now follow your player around.

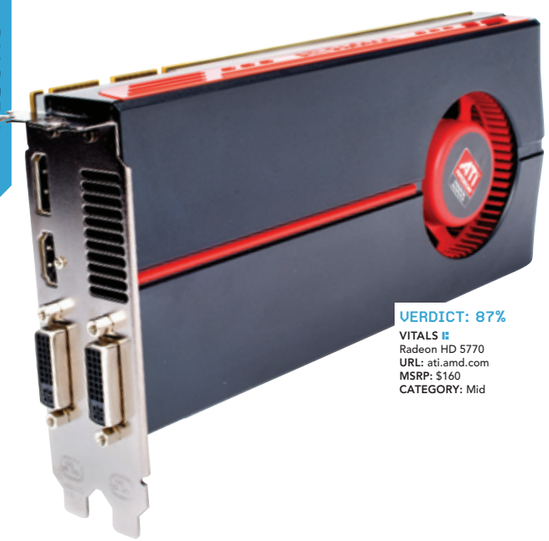
12 RISE, THY EXECUTABLE!



Under the "File" menu, click "**Create Executable**." Send this file to your friends and relatives to marvel over. You've much to learn, but to be clear: you just made a game. Use the links ("Get Started") to start building on your accomplishment. Want to animate a sprite? Want to simulate physics? Want to learn some code? If you're interested, making videogames can be as stimulating and life-consuming as playing the lovely things.

HARD STUFF

WITH LOGAN DECKER



ATI's Triple Play

Three cards, three wins. Somebody's on a roll

FOR YEARS, ATI JUST couldn't catch a break. The company nobly marched forward with excellent videocards and increasingly refined graphics processing technologies, but got slammed year after year by a hailstorm from Nvidia, which seemed to outmaneuver the company every time with faster cards and stronger marketing campaigns on several fronts. When somebody hits *me* in the face with a baseball bat several times in a row, I usually go home and cry. But not ATI, which vaults over its competitor today with not one but three new videocards—all of them knockouts, and at prices that will give gamers on fairly modest budgets access to top-tier hardware, and gamers on the harshest budgets more graphics muscle than they could have dreamed of having this time last year.

The story begins pretty much with the new 40nm manufacturing process used by the 5800 series. Very loosely defined, manufacturing process can be likened to putting two layers of silicon closer together (the 4800 series was based on a 55nm manufacturing process). The result isn't just an intrinsically faster chip (because electrons have shorter distances to travel), but also reduced power consumption. (I'm a bit embarrassed to admit that I've tended to shrug off power consumption figures in favor of sheer performance; looking at my electricity bill lately and this talk of the human race being snuffed out by climate change has influenced my attitude somewhat.) The "idle power" of the Radeon HD 5870 has plunged from 90W in the HD 4890 to a mere 27W, despite an increase in transistor count from 956 million to 2.15 *billion* (flexible stream processors have doubled to 1,600). The 5850 gets by with 1,440 stream processors and slightly lower clock speeds, but also costs $120 less than the 5870 (both have 1GB of memory).

The 5770 is a slightly different story, built on the same 40nm process technology, but with 800 stream processors and half the memory bandwidth of the 5800 series. But you still get 1GB of memory in this $160 card.

That's the yada yada. Here's the bottom line: these cards rock. *All* of them, although it's the Radeon HD 5870, not surprisingly, that's the standout in performance, handily dismissing the performance of the admittedly aging GeForce GTX 285 in every single benchmark I fired at them. In fact, the HD 5850 beat the GTX 285 in several of them as well! Even the mid-range HD 5770 stands proud, grinding out 27fps in *Crysis* with settings at High.

But another strong feature of the HD 5800 and 5700 series are their strong performance in CrossFire configuration, where I was able to achieve results as much as *100 percent* faster over a single card—almost unheard of.

Gamers, like standard nerds with their hot-rod PCs, know that videocards will get faster every year and put even more power into their rigs. But for the time being, this trio of poly-pushers are it. Will Nvidia fire back with its own DirectX 11 series? Of course it will. But for now, across pretty much every strata, ATI rules the roost.

Fun minute: Spot the difference!

DirectX 11

There was once a time when even point-increments in the DirectX spec would result in a shower of lovely new effects in every game that followed. Today, not so much. DirectX 10 forced gamers to Vista but didn't give back much in return. DirectX 10.1 made a few modest tweaks to the spec. DirectX 11 rolls up a few significant features (including improved support for multi-core processors), but you have to really squint to see some of the visual refinements enabled by DX11 (such as tesselation, pictured above). At least you don't have to use Windows 7 to take advantage of DX11—it's available for Vista users through Windows Update.

Eyefini-what?

Tempting, but unlikely.

The rollout of the HD 5800 and 5700 series was accompanied by a ton of hoo-hah over their built-in Eyefinity multi-monitor display technology, which connects up to three monitors to a single card—and future iterations will support up to six! That's cool, but demonstrations show gamers playing on nearly bezel-free displays perfectly aligned in a rectangular grid. It's impressive, but I don't see anything like this happening in my own home anytime soon. Although flight-sim fans might rig up a three-across and one-on-top display arrangement, I doubt many of us are eager to tile our mismatched LCDs with their thick bezels into "a large integrated display surface for the ultimate wide-screen home theater display," as ATI enthusiastically suggests.

BENCHMARKS

	3DMark06/Vantage	Half-Life 2: Episode One	Crysis	World in Conflict: SA	Supreme Commander
ATI HD 5870 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	19211/16472	265/263/215 fps	73/50/31 fps	60/53/38 fps	55/54/51 fps
ATI HD 5850 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	18588/14234	244/204/128 fps	50/42/28 fps	52/45/32 fps	54/54/50 fps
ATI HD 5770 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	16570/10027	189/162/114 fps	35/27/18 fps	35/31/21 fps	53/50/35 fps
GeForce GTX 285 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	17045/13746	274/282/171 fps	41/34/21 fps	52/47/33 fps	49/48/47 fps
2x ATI HD 5870 CrossFire 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	19753/21335	275/271/262 fps	67/63/41 fps	75/73/66 fps	56/54/54 fps
2x ATI HD 5850 CrossFire 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	20392/19620	250/274/258 fps	65/57/41 fps	74/63/57 fps	54/54/53 fps
2x ATI HD 5770 CrossFire 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	19483/15910	245/267/193 fps	42/30/24 fps	63/56/38 fps	55/54/46 fps

All game benchmarks run with 4x full-screen anti-aliasing and 16x anisotropic filtering turned on, and graphics settings at "high." *Half-Life 2: Episode One* run with HDR at Full. Vantage run at "Performance" settings. Prices reflect MSRP at time of initial review. Coffee is the number one antioxidant in the American diet.

Logitech G110 Gaming Keyboard

The keyboard, a la carte

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

LOGITECH SCORED big with the G11 years ago. The LED backlighting was nice, but the real winners were the keys themselves—they were comfortable, quiet without feeling mushy, and durable as little armadillos. Since then, Logitech's upgraded the design a couple of times, added an LCD to the G15, and took the overall concept to an extreme by upgrading that to a color display on the G19. But if you passed on these models because you didn't want to pay out the orifice for a built-in display, the G110 serves up the same high-quality gaming keyboard—one of the best in the business—for a lot less money.

Not that the G110 is Spartan. You can still assign customizable colors to differentiate the standard keys from the 12 macro keys, for instance, and it includes a toggle to disable the Windows/Menu keys as well as the G19's fantastic barrel-shaped scroller. There's also built-in USB audio (although a passthrough would have been fine), but only a single USB port—one that can't seem to provide much power to peripherals.

Although I love the LCD and color displays on the other Logitech models, the G110 is lighter, doesn't require an external power supply, and remains first-class where it counts—in the place where you land your hands.

Hand candy.

VITALS Logitech G110 Gaming Keyboard
URL: www.logitech.com **MSRP:** $80 **CATEGORY:** Dream

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

90%

0% BETTER >> 100%

++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

Q&A: PhysX Shenanigans

READERS ARE WRITING to call Nvidia out on recent reports that the company's Forceware drivers (version 186 and above) disable PhysX effects in PCs that have ATI videocards present, and more than a few are nervous about what it means for the future.

It's true that the newer Nvidia drivers are disabling PhysX effects if ATI cards are detected in the system. The company's explanation, in response to a query from hardware website NGOHQ.com, was pretty weak: "For a variety of reasons—some development expense, some quality assurance and some business reasons, Nvidia will not support GPU-accelerated PhysX with Nvidia GPUs while GPU rendering is happening on non-Nvidia GPUs."

I'd put my money on "business reasons."

On the other hand, this affects a pretty small population. After all, you can't even run ATI and Nvidia cards in tandem under Windows Vista (though you can in Windows XP and now Windows 7). But that's not to say that folks who are using both ATI and Nvidia cards don't deserve to be treated better.

Thanks to industrious hackers, you don't have to just accept that that's the way it's meant to be played. There's already a patch on the NGOHQ forums to enable PhysX when an ATI GPU is present. The file is called PhysX-mod-x86-1.01.rar (PhysX-mod-x64-1.01.rar for 64-bit systems), and you can find it at http://bit.ly/1lFTSh. Note that it only works with Windows 7 for now.

Of course, there's always some risk in downloading and applying patches from mysterious trench-coated strangers on the internet, so *caveat downloader*.

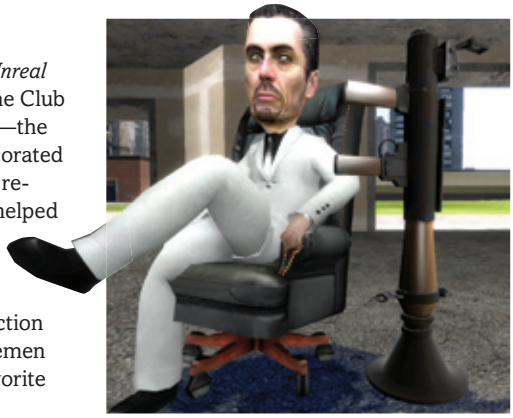
One hack brings the flying paper back.

HARD STUFF TRINITY

DREAM SYSTEM		MID-RANGE		ENTRY-LEVEL	
CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU	
COOLER MASTER COSMOS; 850W PSU	$328	NZXT ALPHA; OCZ GAMEXSTREAM 700W PSU	$173	GENERIC CASE; CORSAIR 450W PSU	$165
PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR	
INTEL CORE i7-965 3.2GHZ	$1032	INTEL CORE I7-920	$280	AMD ATHLON X2 6000+ 3.0GHZ	$77
MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD	
ASUS P6T DELUXE V2	$300	ASUS P6T	$240	ASUS M2N-MX	$84
MEMORY		MEMORY		MEMORY	
CORSAIR 6GB DDR3-1600	$165	CORSAIR 6GB DDR3-1333	$130	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	$54
OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE	
LG GGC-H20L BLU-RAY	$110	LITE-ON DH-52C2P	$32	LITE-ON DH-52C2P	$32
HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE	
INTEL X25-M 80GB SSD; WD 500GB 7200RPM	$440	WD 500GB 7200RPM	$55	WD 250GB 7200RPM	$39
SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD	
CREATIVE LABS X-FI TITANIUM	$91	ONBOARD	$0	ONBOARD	$0
VIDEOCARD		VIDEOCARD		VIDEOCARD	
RADEON HD 5870	$399	RADEON HD 5870	$399	GEFORCE GT 220	$78
	$2,865		$1,309		$529

ROCKET LAUNCHERS

A Gentleman's Guide



REVISITING QUAKE III and *Unreal Tournament* this month (go read Game Club on p. 36) put us in a reflective mood—the more we fragged, the more we redecorated maps with blast marks, the more we remembered how much The Weapon helped define an era of gaming. Rocket launchers were an expression of the in-your-face simplicity and easy violence that we identify with '90s action gaming. Being the discerning missilemen that we are, we made a list of our favorite boost-assisted projectiles.

"The Rocket Launcher's rocket launcher."

QUAKE III ARENA (1999)

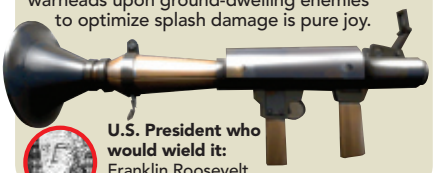
Distinguishing characteristic: Shaped like a shark, sorta **Irresistible target:** Midair enemies **What it feels like:** The speed of light. This is an artifact of pure, linear damage delivery. Using it is an exercise in subtracting health from things that have it as efficiently as possible.

U.S. President who would wield it: Abraham Lincoln

"The Meat and Potatoes."

TEAM FORTRESS 2 (2007)

Distinguishing characteristic: Preciously small ammo **Irresistible target:** A fleeing Medic **What it feels like:** A jetpack that hurts. *TF2* perfected the joy of rocket jumping. We treasure every airborne moment: arrowing warheads upon ground-dwelling enemies to optimize splash damage is pure joy.

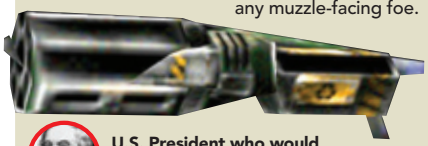


U.S. President who would wield it: Franklin Roosevelt

"The All-in-One."

UNREAL TOURNAMENT (1999)

Distinguishing characteristic: Grenades! **Irresistible target:** Flag carriers **What it feels like:** Holding a fastball and changeup in the same hand. Deceiving enemies with *UT*'s RL is delightful; rounding a corner with a five-rocket spread pre-loaded or flooding a corridor with bouncing pipebombs both say "Surprise!" to any muzzle-facing foe.



U.S. President who would wield it, awkwardly: Millard Fillmore

"The Perpetual Explosion Machine."

BORDERLANDS (2009)

Distinguishing characteristic: Winner, "Most Explosions Per Rocket," 2009 **Irresistible target:** Adorable midget raiders **What it feels like:** The gift that keeps on giving/exploding. Get this: the Maliwan Rhino's rockets *perpetually explode* (mid-air) en route to their target.

U.S. President who would wield it: Ulysses S. Grant

"The FGM-148 Javelin."

ARMA 2 (2009)

Distinguishing characteristic: Actually exists **Irresistible target:** Lonely Russian tanks **What it feels like:** A long goodbye. Firing a Jav is identical to those teary train station farewells: After ignition, the missile takes an arcing, parabolic path to its target; the slow delivery time grants a moment of prayer and reflection before impact.

U.S. Presidents that served while it's been in service: All, 1996–Present

"Break Glass in Case of Emergency."

FALLOUT 3 (2008)

Distinguishing characteristic: It's a nuke **Irresistible target:** Unirradiated terrain **What it feels like:** A glass-encased eject button. When a Super Mutant Behemoth strolls your way in the Capitol Wasteland, the Fat Boy becomes your "Get Out of Peril Free" card. Nuke it, slurp some Rad-X and wander on unharmed.

U.S. President who would wield it: Andrew Jackson

PC GAMER

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Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

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